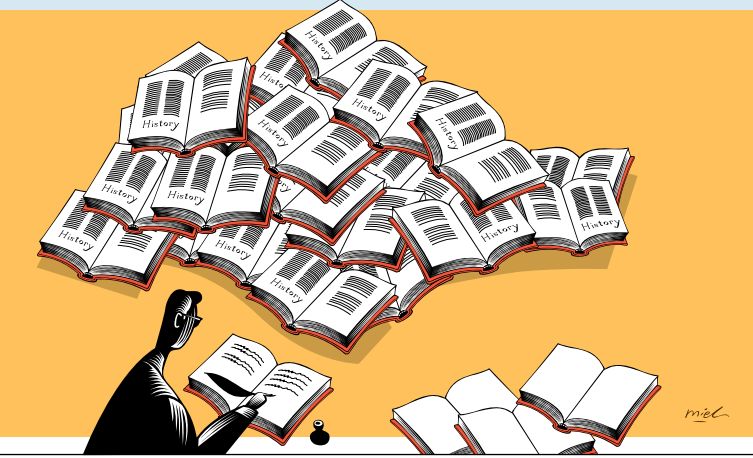


THE STRAITS TIMES

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'Son of Ubi' has seen it all

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Home

Subject-based banding passes the test

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Interfaith champion is ST Singaporean of the Year

Interfaith champion Siti Noor Mastura has been named The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year for 2018.

Ms Noor Mastura, 28, is the co-founder of non-profit organisation Interfaith Youth Circle, which conducts scriptural reasoning sessions, where people discuss passages from religious texts of different faiths that touch on common themes.

It also runs campaigns such as Break Bread Build Bridges, which encourages people from a community who celebrate a religious festival to host someone who is not from that faith so others can experience, say, Hari Raya or Christmas in the home of the host.

President Halimah Yacob presented Ms Noor Mastura with a cash prize of \$20,000 and a trophy at the Istana yesterday.

The award, now in its fourth year, is organised by The Straits Times and presented by UBS Singapore.

It honours Singaporeans who have put the country on the world map, persevered through incredible adversity or made the community a better place through their selfless acts.

Madam Halimah paid tribute to this year's 11 finalists, saying: "From feeding the poor and providing shelter to needy youngsters to leveraging technology to reach under-served needs, you all share some common traits.

"You place the needs of others above your own and worked tirelessly for the community."

Madam Halimah said she hoped that their examples would inspire other Singaporeans to do good.

Janice Tai



Ms Siti Noor Mastura being congratulated by fellow nominees (from left) Kenneth and Adeline Thong, Teo You Yenn, Robert Chew and Elizabeth Tan after being named The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year for 2018 at the Istana yesterday. The co-founder of Interfaith Youth Circle received a cash prize of \$20,000 and a trophy from President Halimah Yacob. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

READ MORE
Singaporeans who made a difference celebrate at Istana event
TOP OF THE NEWS A9-11

Gan explains actions MOH took over HIV data breach

Judgment call was made balancing need for transparency and impact on those affected

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong yesterday defended the way the authorities handled the HIV Registry data breach, and said public disclosure

sure of the matter was a judgment call balancing the need to be transparent and how it would affect the people on the list.

He told Parliament that while action has been taken to delete the information that had been leaked, the authorities are still monitoring further exposure of the data.

Last month, the Government revealed that details of 14,200 Singaporeans and foreigners diagnosed with HIV were stolen and posted online. The person who did it was American lecturer Mikhy Farrera Brochez, who was deported last year after serving a jail term for

fraud and drug-related offences.

Brochez, who is HIV-positive, had twice used the blood of his doctor boyfriend Ler Teck Siang for an HIV test to get an Employment Pass.

Ler was head of the National Public Health Unit and had downloaded the HIV Registry onto a thumb drive. Brochez got his hands on it.

In a ministerial statement after MPs raised questions on how the matter had been handled, Mr Gan said that the well-being of those on the registry weighed heavily in how the authorities responded.

When the Ministry of Health (MOH) first found out in 2016 that Brochez had access to the confidential information, it had to decide whether to inform those affected and to publicise the matter.

"These were not straightforward

decisions. On the one hand, there is the need to be transparent. On the other hand, we need to consider the impact of an announcement on the affected persons with HIV - would it serve their interest, or harm them instead?" he said. Doctors at MOH felt that particular attention had to be paid to the concerns of HIV patients, as HIV status is a deeply emotional and personal matter.

At that time, there was also no evidence that the confidential information had been disseminated to the public. Whatever data Brochez had revealed had also been seized or deleted by the police, said Mr Gan.

The decision in 2016 was not to inform those on the list or make the data breach public.

But last year, when Brochez sent a screenshot of 31 registry records

to several government agencies, MOH decided to contact and alert the 31 affected individuals as it could not retrieve the screenshot.

Mr Gan said MOH did not disclose the leak then as there was no evidence that Brochez had more than these records. It also felt a public announcement could create anxiety and distress among all whose names were on the registry.

Then last month, when Brochez put the full contents of the HIV Registry up to January 2013 online and provided the link to a non-government party, the likelihood of the identities being made public increased significantly.

"MOH therefore decided to make a public announcement on Jan 28 even though we remained deeply concerned about the impact this would have on the affected persons," said Mr Gan.

"We sought to quickly contact each of the affected individuals to inform them of the circumstances and also offer them assistance prior to the announcement. We worked with the police and other relevant parties to disable access to the information as quickly as possible."

Mr Gan stressed that at each juncture in 2016, last year and this year, MOH had to make judgment calls.

"It is arguable that MOH should have made a different call. But I reject any allegation that MOH sought to cover up the incident," he said, alluding to comments that the ministry had been less than open about the matter. He added: "On all three occasions, MOH's primary concern was the well-being of the persons on the HIV Registry."

He also elaborated on how the ministry had been tightening security of the HIV Registry since 2012, even before the issue surfaced.

Wrapping up, he said this has been "a regrettable incident caused by the irresponsible and deplorable actions of two individuals".

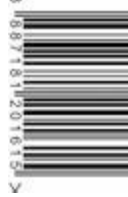
Ler betrayed the trust of the ministry and the medical profession.

Mr Gan said: "I am sorry that the irresponsible actions of one of our officers have resulted in such distress to the affected persons."

As for Brochez, he said: "We will spare no effort in bringing him to justice again for his latest crime."

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READ MORE
Reports from Parliament on the HIV data leak
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10 must-reads for today

1 Shock split with coach

The tennis world is stunned by Japanese star Naomi Osaka's parting of ways with her coach just 16 days after completing her feat of winning consecutive Grand Slams. German Sascha Bajin helped her to the US Open and Australian Open titles as well as the world No. 1 ranking, but their relationship apparently soured earlier this year. **SPORT C8**



Naomi Osaka with coach Sascha Bajin at the Brisbane International women's quarter-final match at the Pat Rafter Arena on Jan 3. PHOTO REUTERS

2 Gan explains MOH's actions

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said in Parliament that the authorities knew Mikhy Farrera Brochez had the confidential information in the HIV Registry only in 2016. The ministry, whose priority was the well-being of the people affected, had to decide whether to inform them and whether to make a public announcement. **TOP OF THE NEWS A1**

3 HDB launches 3,739 flats

The Housing Board, in this year's first sales exercise, launched 3,739 flats – including 3,162 Build-To-Order units – in five projects across Kallang/Whampoa, Jurong West and Sengkang. The two projects in Kallang/Whampoa are likely to be the most popular. **TOP OF THE NEWS A12**

4 Hopeful sign for trade talks

US President Donald Trump wants to meet his Chinese counterpart, Mr Xi Jinping, "very soon" in an effort to end the trade war between their countries, the White House has said. Negotiators from both sides are meeting this week in Beijing, but concerns are mounting that the talks are faltering as a March 1 deadline for a hike in US tariffs approaches. **WORLD A14**

5 Insects face extinction

Nearly half of all insect species are in rapid decline and a third could disappear altogether in a "mass extinction", according to a new study that warns of dire consequences for crop pollination and natural food chains. Habitat change is the biggest cause of the insect decline and extinction threat. **WORLD A18**

6 Looking back for the future

The bicentennial is a good time to pause and take stock of our past as we prepare for the future, says Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin, whose office in Parliament lies in an area from which 700-year-old artefacts have been dug up. **OPINION A21**

6 New initiatives by SMU

Singapore Management University is looking at getting its students to declare their life missions, SMU president Lily Kong (right) announced yesterday. Students will be guided by faculty mentors to build a resume that will enable them to fulfil their mission.

Professor Kong also said students can expect more global exposure opportunities with the setting up of global centres. **HOME B1**

8 Law change welcomed

Making attempted suicide no longer a crime has been welcomed by observers. The Criminal Law Reform Bill proposed in Parliament will amend the Penal Code to decriminalise suicide, but abetment of attempted suicide will still be an offence. **HOME B2**

9 Slide in Dec retail takings

The muted holiday spending put a dampener on retailers in Singapore, with sales well down last December. Takings were 6 per cent below those of the same month in 2017, a sharper fall than the 3.6 per cent slide forecast by economists. **BUSINESS C1**

10 Game to be parents?

A new game in China puts players in control of the most fearsome of characters: Mum and Dad. The mission? Raise a son or daughter from cradle to college. Since its release in September, Chinese Parents has found a huge audience on Steam, an online marketplace run by American game maker Valve Corp. **LIFE D6**



PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

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INTERACTIVE

Budget over the years

Over the years, Singapore's Budgets have reflected the economic development at home and external trends. Here are some key policies marking major turning points for the local economy. <http://str.sg/budget19historical>



VIDEO

Quake-proof homes

See how Indonesia, a country that is prone to natural disasters, has come up with ways to build stronger houses that are resistant to earthquakes and tornadoes. <http://str.sg/crackproof>

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WATCH FEATURED SUBJECT TO STOCK AVAILABILITY

How the HIV data leak was handled



In Parliament yesterday, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong explained how information from Singapore's HIV Registry had fallen into the wrong hands and was disclosed online, and what action the authorities took.

Nov 2012

American lecturer Mikhy Farrera Brochez complains to the Ministry of Health (MOH) that his Singaporean boyfriend Ler Teck Siang, then head of the National Public Health Unit, had disclosed to others information about Brochez's HIV status.

Brochez also claims that Ler had shared screenshots

of his HIV status with others.

MOH attempts to engage Brochez, but he is uncooperative and evasive, and postpones meetings. At one point, he says he does not want to continue with the investigations into his allegations. MOH keeps up the investigation nonetheless.

May 2013

Ler is reassigned to another role. His access to the live HIV Registry is terminated.

Above: The National Public Health Unit, which was headed by Ler Teck Siang when MOH received a complaint about him from his boyfriend. LIANHE ZHAO/BA FILE PHOTO

MOH had to exercise care, judgment in deciding whether to inform public: Gan

Rei Kurohi

A key factor in the Government's decision not to disclose the HIV Registry data breach when it first came to light in 2016 was that there was no evidence the information had been disseminated to the public then, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament yesterday.

Another was the sensitivity surrounding HIV status.

In April 2016, American Mikhy Farrera Brochez revealed to the authorities that he had names and particulars from the registry.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) had to decide whether to inform the affected persons and make a public announcement about this. It decided not to.

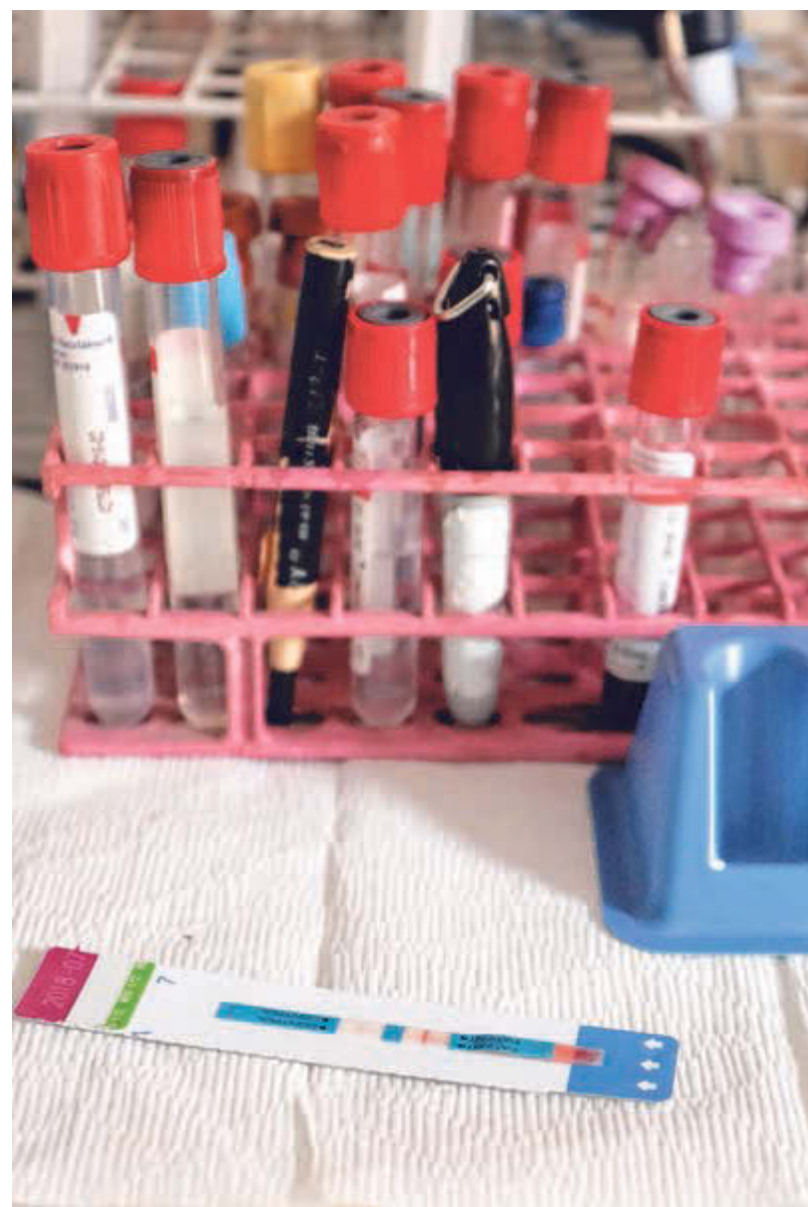
"On the one hand, there is the need to be transparent. On the other hand, we need to consider the impact of an announcement on the affected persons with HIV – would it serve their interest, or harm them instead?" said Mr Gan.

He discussed this with medical colleagues in MOH. "They emphasised the need to pay particular attention to the concerns and needs of HIV patients. A person's HIV status is a deeply emotional and personal matter. Some patients will experience high anxiety and distress from a disclosure or announcement," he said.

"Some will feel compelled to reveal their HIV status to family members or friends. Relationships can be disrupted; lives can be changed. We had to exercise care and judgment in making our decision, and the well-being of the affected persons weighed heavily in our considerations."

Brochez sent the names and particulars of 75 individuals to the police and government authorities in April 2016. After an "extensive" search of his residence, computers, storage devices and e-mail account, the police seized or deleted all relevant information they found.

The police also found that Brochez had e-mailed a further 46 records to his mother. She agreed to let the police access her e-mail account and delete the records.



Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said that on all three occasions when it came to light that Mikhy Farrera Brochez had data from the HIV Registry, the Health Ministry's primary concern was the well-being of the people on the registry. PHOTO: REUTERS

Mr Gan said: "While there could be no guarantee, MOH had good reason to believe that the information had been secured and the risk of future exposure significantly mitigated."

Of the decision to go public, he said: "Ultimately, it was a judgment call, to be made based on the information we had, the considerations for and against an announcement, and the assessed risk of future public exposure of the information."

He said MOH judged that, on balance, an announcement then would not serve the interests of the affected individuals when weighed against the inevitable anxiety and distress they would experience.

Brochez was deported in April last year after serving his sentence for drug use and cheating offences. Last May, he sent a screenshot containing 31 records from the HIV Registry to several government authorities, indicating that he still pos-

JUDGMENT CALL

It is arguable that MOH should have made a different call. But I reject any allegation that MOH sought to cover up the incident... We now know that Brochez retained some data after the police seized all the files they could find in 2016. Quite possibly, he still has more files in his possession... Should MOH now make known all that Brochez may or may not still possess? Do we contact every person whose data may or may not be at risk? And in the process inflict more harm on people even though it may ultimately turn out that Brochez in fact does not have the information?

HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG

essed data from the registry.

MOH then contacted the affected individuals to inform them of the leak, but it decided not to inform the public as the 31 records were part of the 75 Brochez had previously disclosed.

Mr Gan said: "As on previous occasions, Brochez had only shared it with government authorities, and not to any wider audience. A public announcement would create anxiety and distress not just among the 31 persons, but also other HIV patients whose names were in the registry."

Last month, Brochez put the entire contents of the HIV Registry up to January 2013 online and sent the link to a non-government party.

MOH then decided to make a public announcement on Jan 28 as the likelihood of the affected people's identities being made public had increased significantly, Mr Gan said.

Some individuals then told MOH that Brochez had attempted to contact them last year and had given them links to confidential information he had uploaded online.

It was similar to what he uploaded last month, and no new individuals were affected. MOH worked with other authorities to block access to this information, Mr Gan said.

He said that at each juncture when it came to light that Brochez had information from the registry –

May 2016, May last year and last month – MOH had a responsibility to balance the opposing considerations and exercise judgment.

"It is arguable that MOH should have made a different call. But I reject any allegation that MOH sought to cover up the incident," he said.

He stressed that on all three occasions, MOH's primary concern was the well-being of the persons on the HIV Registry.

The authorities still face the same dilemma today. "We now know that Brochez retained some data after the police seized all the files they could find in 2016. Quite possibly, he still has more files in his possession," said Mr Gan.

"Should MOH now make known all that Brochez may or may not still possess? Do we contact every person whose data may or may not be at risk? And in the process inflict more harm on people even though it may ultimately turn out that Brochez in fact does not have the information?"

He said MOH has decided to continue to manage the situation in a way that reduces the possibility of further exposure.

"This is consistent with the decision taken in 2016, and again in 2018. It is based on what we believe to be in the interest of the potentially affected persons."

rei@sph.com.sg



Health Minister Gan Kim Yong gave details about the HIV Registry data leak in Parliament yesterday. PHOTO: GOV SG

Dec 2013

MOH discovers that Brochez may have submitted fake HIV blood tests to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to retain his Employment Pass.

MOH informs MOM and makes a police report.

Jan 2014

Ler resigns from MOH.

The police and MOH begin investigating whether Brochez had submitted fake blood tests and whether Ler had abetted him and provided false information to investigators.

May 2014

Brochez continues to be uncooperative with the police, and at first refuses to provide a statement to the police.

That month, he is stopped from leaving Singapore, and gives a police statement. In it, he lies to the police that it was his blood that was tested during a HIV test conducted in November 2013.

MOH orders Brochez to undergo a new blood test, but he refuses.



April 2016

Brochez is arrested for repeatedly refusing to take a blood test. He provides police and other government authorities with a list of 75 names and particulars from the HIV Registry.

This is the first time MOH has evidence that Brochez may have access to the confidential data, said Mr Gan.

May 2016

MOH makes another police report on May 16.

Police raid Ler's and Brochez's premises, seizing computers, electronic storage devices and other materials.

Police discover that Brochez had sent a further 46 records from the registry to his mother by e-mail. She agrees to let police access her account and delete the records. MOH says the police, at this point, have seized everything found in the duo's possession and have done their best to ensure no confidential information remained with them.

A decision is taken not to make a public announcement as it "would not serve the interests of the affected individuals", said Mr Gan.

June 2016

Ler and Brochez are charged in court.

Ler is charged under the Penal Code and the Official Secrets Act (OSA). His charge sheet, which is public information, states he had access to the HIV Registry as part of his position at MOH, and that he had failed to take reasonable care of the information in the registry by failing to retain possession of a thumb drive on which he had saved the registry.

Brochez is charged under the Misuse of Drugs Act, Penal Code and the Infectious Diseases Act.

The Attorney-General's Chambers decides not to charge him under the OSA. It assesses that he would likely be sentenced to a fine only or at most a few weeks in jail as there had been no wide dissemination of the information at that stage, and he had primarily used the information to complain to government agencies. His other charges are more serious and carry "far heavier penalties".

Brochez is issued a stern warning under the OSA.

March 2017

Brochez is convicted and jailed for 28 months, inclusive of time he had served in remand since June 2016.

In May 2016, police raided the premises of Ler Teck Siang (left) and his American lecturer boyfriend Mikhy Farrera Brochez (right), seizing computers, electronic storage devices and other materials. They discovered Brochez had sent a further 46 records from the registry to his mother by e-mail. PHOTOS: ST FILE, FAITH MEDICAL GROUP

April 2018

Brochez is released from jail and deported.

May 2018

Brochez sends a screenshot to several government authorities containing the details of 31 persons. They are found to be among the original 75 names he disclosed in 2016.

MOH makes another police report.

It also decides to contact the 31 individuals to inform them. This was because unlike before, it could not retrieve the screenshot of the 31 records in Brochez's possession.

MOH did not make a public announcement as there was still no specific evidence Brochez had more information beyond these 31 records. Also, he had shared it only with the government authorities and not with any wider audience. "A public announcement would create anxiety and distress not just among the 31 persons, but also other HIV patients whose names were in the registry," said Mr Gan.

Sept 2018

Ler is convicted and sentenced to 24 months in jail. He appeals and is scheduled to appear in court in March 2019. His OSA charge is currently stood down, but will be dealt with after proceedings on his other charges have concluded.

Jan 2019

MOH becomes aware that Brochez probably still possessed the entire HIV Registry beyond the 31 records. He had also put the information online and provided the link to a non-government party.

This means the likelihood of him making public the identities of affected persons rises significantly. MOH decides to make a public announcement. It also contacts affected persons and works with the police and other parties to disable access to the information quickly.



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MPs ask about support for those affected and recourse available

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

Following Health Minister Gan Kim Yong's ministerial statement yesterday on the leak of confidential data from the HIV Registry, several MPs raised questions and voiced concerns over how it happened.

Some also gave suggestions on how to prevent a similar incident or to better support the affected individuals. Here are some of the questions they asked and the replies from Mr Gan as well as Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam.

**CONCERNS ABOUT
BLACKMAIL ATTEMPTS**

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang GRC) asked if American Mikhy Farrera Brochez, who posted confi-

dential HIV information online, had attempted to blackmail or make demands of people on the HIV Registry.

Mr Gan said he could not go into details as the case is under police investigation. What he did say was: "Brochez is not very consistent in his communication with all the relevant parties. So, it is very difficult to fathom what is his motive in sending these letters or demands."

"So far, we have not received any complaints or feedback on blackmail or threats from patients or from any of our contacts."

**CONCERNS ABOUT PROSECUTION
OF RECIPIENTS OF HIV DATA**

Non-Constituency MP Daniel Goh asked if a person contacted by Brochez, who does not report this and "any leakage of confi-

dential information", is liable for prosecution.

Mr Shanmugam replied that while "technically there could potentially be some offences under the Official Secrets Act", action is unlikely to be taken against anyone who informs or sends the information received to the Government.

**SUPPORT FOR AFFECTED
INDIVIDUALS WITH HIV**

Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson) asked what the risk of potential suicide was among those affected, and the support the MOH is giving them to "help them tide over this very difficult period".

Mr Gan said feedback he received from medical social workers indicated that there were some people who were suicidal when told that their details had gone public.

He said the social workers "had to

manage the case very delicately" by sensing the distress the patients were facing and making a judgment "how much to tell them, how much to stress them further or to refer them to help", he said.

When they came across someone with "clear intention to do something drastic", they might refer them to an expert from the Institute of Mental Health.

But more often, he said, they would refer them to someone the person is familiar with, such as someone in their support group.

**RECOURSE FOR THOSE
WHO WERE AFFECTED**

Nominated Member of Parliament Irene Quay asked: "What will be the recourse for victims, that the victims can seek, as a result of this exposure of sensitive information?"

Mr Gan said patients can take civil action against MOH on breach of data or loss of data.

But he added that MOH would "encourage them to talk to us and we will discuss with them what are the ways to help them and to support them in whichever way we can".

salma@sph.com.sg



WHAT CAN VICTIMS DO?

What will be the recourse for victims, that the victims can seek, as a result of this exposure of sensitive information?



**NOMINATED MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
IRENE QUAY** (above). Health Minister Gan Kim Yong replied that patients could possibly take civil action against MOH.

MOH knew only in 2016 that Brochez had access to HIV data

It had no basis to suspect he was in possession of HIV Registry data in 2012 or 2013: Minister

Fabian Koh

When he first informed the authorities in 2012 that his partner had disclosed information about his HIV status to others and shared screenshots of this, Mikhy Farrera Brochez, the American at the centre of the leak of Singapore's HIV Registry, was uncooperative and did not provide any evidence.

And that is why investigations did not make much headway, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament yesterday when several MPs raised questions on whether the Ministry of Health (MOH) had known about Brochez's possible access to information from the HIV Registry as early as 2012.

In a ministerial statement setting out the chronology of events, Mr Gan said the issue in 2012 was not about Brochez's access to the registry, but whether his partner Ler Teck Siang, a doctor who headed the National Public Health Unit, had revealed the American's HIV status to other people. Brochez was then living with Ler.

In November 2012, Brochez alleged to MOH that Ler had disclosed information about Brochez's HIV status to others. "He later also claimed that Ler had shared screenshots of his HIV status with others," said Mr Gan.

"Despite multiple attempts by MOH to engage him, Brochez did not provide any evidence to support his allegation. He was uncooperative and evasive, and rejected or postponed meetings with MOH on several occasions," said Mr Gan.

"At one point, he even informed MOH officers that he was leaving Singapore and did not want to con-

tinue with the investigation into his allegation. Due to his uncooperative attitude, the investigation could not make much headway."

Nevertheless, the ministry reassigned Ler to another role in May 2013 and kept up the investigation. The doctor's access to the live HIV Registry was terminated after his reassignment, he said.

In the course of its investigation, MOH discovered in December 2013 that Brochez may have submitted fake HIV blood tests to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in order to retain his Employment Pass. MOH informed MOM and also made a po-

lice report. Ler resigned the following month.

Mr Gan said: "MOH's investigations in 2012 and 2013 were on Brochez's allegation that Ler had revealed Brochez's HIV status to others. At no point in 2012 or 2013 did MOH have basis to suspect that Brochez had access to, or was in possession of, the data in the HIV Registry."

Between 2014 and 2016, the police and MOH investigated whether Brochez had indeed faked his blood tests, and whether Ler had abetted him and provided false information to investigators. Mr Gan



In 2012, Mikhy Farrera Brochez alleged to the Health Ministry that his partner Ler Teck Siang (above) had disclosed details about Brochez's HIV status to others.

said the investigations were difficult as Brochez refused to provide a statement, until May 2014, when he was stopped while trying to leave Singapore. He lied that it was his blood that was used in a HIV test in November 2013.

MOH ordered him to undergo a fresh blood test for HIV to verify the claim, but Brochez refused. In late April 2016, he was arrested for refusing to comply with the orders to take a blood test.

He then provided the police and the government authorities with 75 names and particulars from the HIV Registry. Following this, MOH made a police report on May 16, 2016.

"This was the first time MOH had evidence that Brochez may have access to confidential HIV-related data," said Mr Gan.

The police raided Ler's and Brochez's premises simultaneously and "seized and secured all relevant materials".

"These included their computers and electronic storage devices containing files with confidential information from the HIV Registry, files related to hospital services and to other infectious diseases, as well as other information likely used by Ler for his work such as e-mails, HIV studies and reports," said Mr Gan.

The police searched through Brochez's e-mail account and found that he had sent the same screenshot that he had sent to the government authorities, as well as a PDF file of a further 46 records from the HIV Registry, to his mother.

The police contacted Brochez's mother, who agreed to let the police access her e-mail account and delete those records.

Mr Gan said: "At this point, the police had seized everything they found in Ler's and Brochez's possession, and had done their best to ensure that no further confidential information remained with Ler and Brochez, including in their known online accounts."

He added: "It was always recognised that there was a risk that Brochez could have hidden away some more information. Unfortunately, as recent events showed, Brochez did manage to retain at least some data which he has recently disclosed, and we cannot rule out the possibility that he has more."

Ler and Brochez were both charged in court in June 2016. Ler was charged under the Penal Code and Official Secrets Act. Brochez was charged with offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act, Penal Code and Infectious Diseases Act.

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BROCHEZ WAS UNCOOPERATIVE

Despite multiple attempts by MOH to engage him, Brochez did not provide any evidence to support his allegation. He was uncooperative and evasive, and rejected or postponed meetings with MOH on several occasions. At one point, he even informed MOH officers that he was leaving Singapore and did not want to continue with the investigation into his allegation. Due to his uncooperative attitude, the investigation could not make much headway.



HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG

POSSIBLE THAT BROCHEZ HAD MORE DATA

It was always recognised that there was a risk that Brochez could have hidden away some more information. Unfortunately, as recent events showed, Brochez did manage to retain at least some data which he has recently disclosed, and we cannot rule out the possibility that he has more.



MR GAN

Why Brochez was not charged under Official Secrets Act in 2016

Mikhy Farrera Brochez, the American who allegedly leaked information from Singapore's HIV Registry, was not charged under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) back in 2016 as he was already facing other charges that carried heavier penalties, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said yesterday.

Brochez first alerted the authorities in April 2016 that he might have access to confidential HIV-related data when he sent 75 names and particulars from the registry to the authorities.

But he was not charged under the OSA, and instead faced charges for

offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act, Penal Code and Infectious Diseases Act in June 2016.

Explaining the circumstances, Mr Gan told the House that the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) decided not to charge Brochez under the OSA after assessing that he would likely be sentenced to only a fine, or at most a few weeks in jail.

This was because there had been no wide dissemination of the information then, and Brochez had primarily used the information to complain to government agencies.

"He was already facing numerous fraud and drug-related charges,



Mikhy Farrera Brochez, who first alerted the authorities in April 2016 that he might have access to confidential HIV-related data, was not charged under the OSA then as he was already facing other fraud and drug-related charges, which carried heavier penalties. PHOTO: CLARK COUNTY SHERIFF OFFICE

which carried far heavier penalties.

"AGC also assessed that any jail term under the OSA was likely to be concurrent with jail terms that he would serve under the other offences," said Mr Gan, revealing that Brochez was issued with a stern warning for the OSA offence.

Meanwhile, Brochez's partner Ler Teck Siang, who was formerly head of the National Public Health Unit (NPHU), was charged under the Penal Code and the OSA. His charge sheet stated that he had access to the HIV Registry as part of his former position as NPHU head, and had failed to take reasonable care of the information by failing to retain possession of a thumb drive on which he had saved the HIV Registry.

In September last year, Ler was convicted for abetting Brochez to commit cheating and providing false information to the police and Ministry of Health, and sentenced to two years in jail. He has appealed against this, with the hearing set for next month.

On two occasions in 2008 and 2013, Brochez, who is HIV-positive, conspired with Ler to submit fake blood tests to the Ministry of Manpower for his Employment Pass applications.

"AGC decided to go to trial against Ler on the cheating and false information charges first, as they were more serious and carried stiffer penalties," said Mr Gan.

The trial for Ler's drug charges will be held in May, as it also involves stiffer penalties, including caning. His OSA charge is currently stood down, which means it has been put aside until the proceedings on his other charges have been concluded.

"So that there is no doubt, let me say again that the OSA charge against Ler is still 'live'. AGC will decide on the OSA charge after proceedings on his other charges have concluded. This is the usual course," said Mr Gan.

Fabian Koh

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2,400 Singaporeans affected by data leak contacted by MOH

Ministry providing support and will continue to work with groups to reduce HIV stigma, says Gan

Rei Kurohi

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has reached out to 2,400 of the 3,500 Singaporeans affected by the HIV Registry data leak who are diagnosed with HIV and are still alive, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong told Parliament yesterday.

But it was not able to reach everyone on the HIV Registry, which dates back to 1985, as many had dated contact information, he said.

Some were foreigners who had applied for work passes but never worked in Singapore. Others had previously worked in Singapore

but are no longer here.

Of the 14,200 people whose personal information was leaked by American Mikhy Farrera Brochez on Jan 22, 8,800 were foreigners and the remaining 5,400 Singaporeans and permanent residents. Of the Singaporeans, 3,500 are alive.

Mr Gan said MOH's medical social workers identified the patients likely to require more support so that designated officers could exercise extra care when calling them. Counsellors were also on standby to speak to those in distress or who required more advice and support.

He noted that some affected individuals may prefer to discuss their concerns with those they are more familiar with, such as the medical social workers, nurses and doctors who have been supporting their ongoing care and treatment.

"We have arranged with the relevant public hospitals to have medi-

cal social workers and doctors on site to attend to them," said Mr Gan.

"Understandably, despite these efforts, some will continue to be concerned. Some may decline to return to care because of the fear of future disclosure. Some felt we should have just informed the affected individuals. A few wished they had not been called at all."

Mr Gan said medical social workers were themselves distressed by the news they had to break, and felt the anguish that the patients experienced when they were told.

He added that they had to conduct the calls carefully and gently, and be alert to signs of distress so that they could help the patients appropriately. The medical social workers have, at times, become the target of anger and blame, but still would do their best to support the affected persons, said Mr Gan.

"These reactions are not unex-

pected. They were the reasons we made a judgment call in 2016 not to make a public announcement, and in 2018 to inform only the affected patients," he added.

Several MPs asked how MOH will help to destigmatise HIV following the leak. Nominated MP Walter Theseira suggested changes to immigration and employment restrictions on foreigners with HIV.

Mr Gan said such policies are reviewed regularly, taking into account international practices and the concerns of Singaporeans. Some adjustments, like lifting the restriction on people living with HIV coming here for short-term stays, have been made over the years.

But he said the Government must be very cautious in approaching the issue as HIV remains "a very serious infectious disease". Restrictions on long-term stays remain in place.

Mr Gan said HIV testing and counselling services are more widely available, with 10 sites across the island offering anonymous testing.

He also said that MOH will continue to work with groups like Action for Aids to step up public education, stigma reduction, treatment and counselling, but that destigmatisation efforts have to cut across society.

"How each of us as individuals relates to persons with HIV also matters a lot," said Mr Gan.

"Here, I would like to appeal to Singaporeans to stand in support of these affected individuals and our efforts to fight the stigma against persons living with HIV."

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HELP ON HAND

We have arranged with the relevant public hospitals to have medical social workers and doctors on site to attend to them. Understandably, despite these efforts, some will continue to be concerned. Some may decline to return to care because of the fear of future disclosure. Some felt we should have just informed the affected individuals. A few wished they had not been called at all.



HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG

HIV Registry security safeguards in line with govt policy then

Fabian Koh

Before 2012, staff of the National Public Health Unit (NPHU) were allowed to use personal thumb drives to download the HIV Registry to carry out their work such as routine data entry, contact tracing and analysis.

This was because the registry was placed then in a secured network drive, which meant the file could be accessed and downloaded only from government-issued computers, and was password protected.

This was revealed by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong in Parliament when answering questions from

MPs regarding the purpose and safeguards of the HIV Registry.

As the NPHU head then, Singaporean doctor Ler Teck Siang had the authority to access information in the HIV Registry as required for his work. He is believed to have downloaded confidential information from the HIV Registry onto a thumb drive, and then failed to retain possession of it.

Ler has since been charged under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) for mishandling the information.

On Jan 22, his American partner – Mikhy Farrera Brochez – posted online the information from the entire HIV Registry, prompting the Ministry of Health (MOH) to disclose

the data breach and triggering concerns about the level of data security and safeguards on staff access to confidential information.

In Parliament yesterday, Mr Gan said the security safeguards for the HIV Registry in 2012 and 2013 were in accordance with prevailing government policies on classified information and IT security at that time. He said staff were briefed on the policies, systems and processes, and regularly reminded of the sensitivity of the information that they should access on a need-to-know basis.

"All of them signed an undertaking to observe confidentiality obligations under the OSA," he added.

Mr Gan said the HIV Registry

database had been migrated to a network-based system in 2012 even before the complaint from Brochez in November 2012 that Ler had shared screenshots of his HIV status with others.

NPHU staff no longer had to download a database file from a network drive, password-protected and accessible only from government-issued computers. They could instead retrieve records from the network-based system, enhancing the audit trail, said Mr Gan. In 2014, alerts of multiple failed log-in attempts were added to the system.

He added that the NPHU system was further strengthened in 2016 following a data security review by

MOH's chief data officer.

Downloading and decrypting HIV Registry data now requires approval from the director of the Communicable Diseases Division or higher, with a two-person approval process to ensure information cannot be accessed by a single person.

A dedicated workstation for handling data from the HIV Registry was also set aside and locked down to prevent unauthorised data removal.

In 2017, the unit complied with government-wide policy to disable the use of unauthorised portable storage devices on official computers, and allow only the use of authorised and encrypted thumb drives, said Mr Gan.

Moving forward, he said a data analytics group had been set up in April last year to focus on data usage and safeguards. Within the group is a six-person Data Governance Division which formulates policies, practices and guidelines for MOH and its agencies.

Mr Gan said MOH will "expand the role and resourcing of this unit", and task it with a specific mandate and team to look into the compliance and audit of data access and use.

He added that in the light of the HIV Registry leak, and the increased use of data across the healthcare sector, having staff adhere to data security and governance policies is crucial. However, Mr Gan also said there is "no foolproof system" as the integrity of a person can only be proven over time.

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FromTheGallery

People hold power to fight stigma, show compassion



Salma Khalik

Senior Health Correspondent

The leak of confidential information from Singapore's HIV Registry has left a painful imprint.

Thousands of lives have been affected. Some have even contemplated suicide.

Could a better security regime have averted this disturbing episode? Should the Ministry of Health (MOH) have done certain things differently?

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to find fault and say how things could have been done better.

But judging actions taken in the past from today's perspective is tricky business.

The lapse in security took place before May 2013 – the month that Ler Teck Siang was removed from his position as head of the National Public Health Unit.

In those days, the digital security regime for confidential data was not what it is today.

Seven years ago, it was perfectly normal for authorised staff – and Ler was clearly one – to download the HIV Registry to carry out routine data entry, contact tracing and analysis. They were also allowed to use personal thumb drives to transfer information.

In fact, at that time, information to be downloaded was not even encrypted.

As Health Minister Gan Kim Yong explained: "You were allowed to have portable storage devices at that time because the encrypted storage devices were only a requirement in 2017."

He told Parliament yesterday that the security safeguards for the HIV Registry in 2012 to 2013 were in line with prevailing government policies on classified information and IT security.

This may seem appallingly lax now. It was normal then. It was certainly not ideal. It was fraught with risk, as is evident now. But it was in keeping with the norms of those days.

This was two years before the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore was set up and well before the days when Internet separation for public servants was mooted. And years before the 2018 data breach at SingHealth – which underlined the need for stringent security to protect confidential data after information on more than 1.5 million people was stolen.

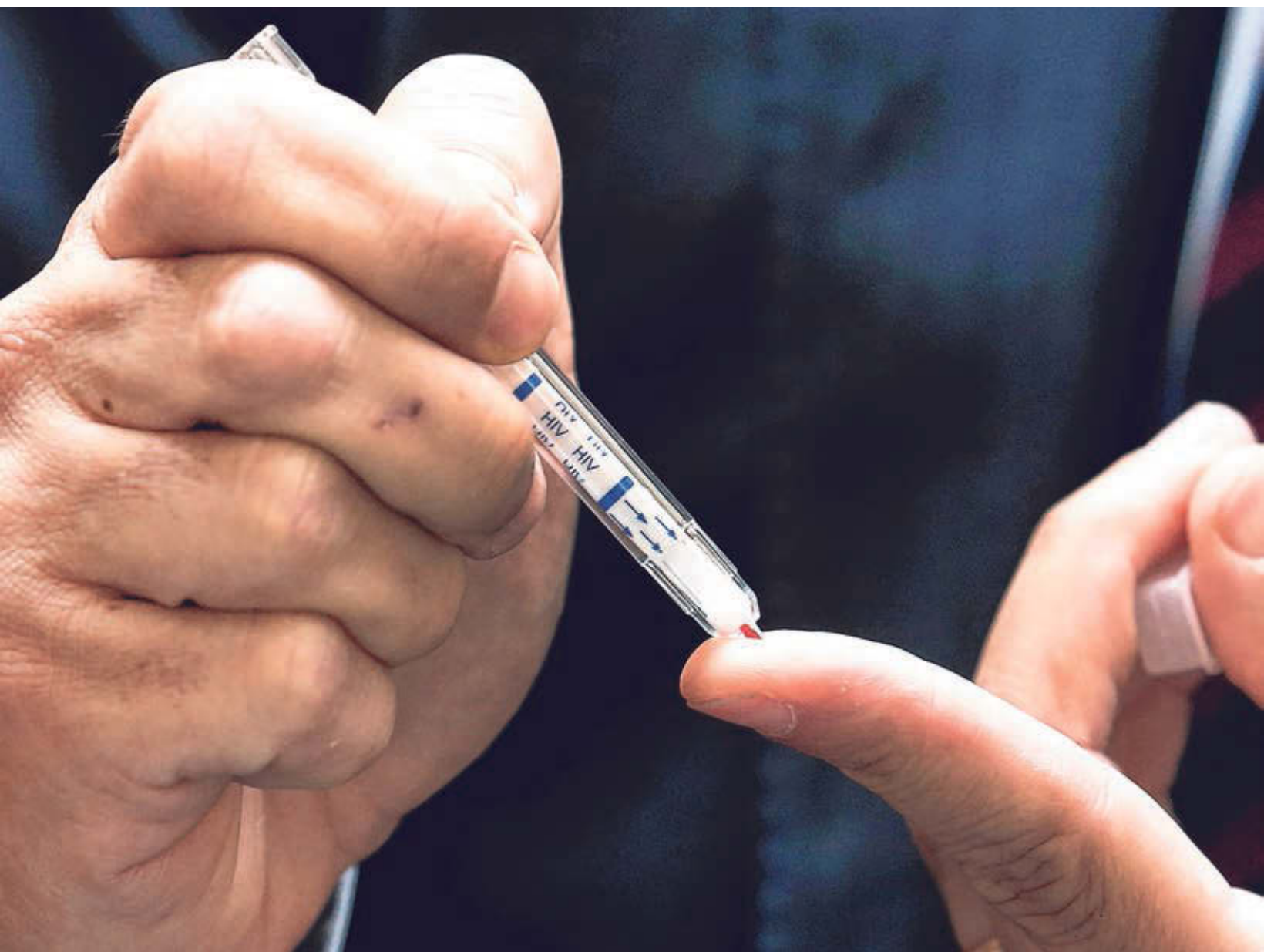
It was, in other words, another painful episode from which lessons were drawn. But it was not an aberration for its times.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) asked if people hired to positions dealing with sensitive information should be subject to character testing.

It is not clear if there was anything in the public domain to suggest that Ler, a medical doctor, lacked integrity when he was hired for that role.

Although Ler and Mikhy Farrera Brochez met and fell in love in 2007, they did not get "married" until 2014.

Brochez is HIV-positive. As the two fell out, Brochez accused Ler



Thousands of lives have been affected by the leak of confidential information from the HIV Registry, and some have contemplated suicide. PHOTO: REUTERS

of telling a third party about his condition.

So while a "character test" might not have revealed that Ler was a security risk, perhaps it is fair to say that a closer scrutiny of Ler might have revealed that he was in a potential conflict of interest – a man in charge of the HIV directory whose own partner is HIV-positive. The relationship soured and, sadly, innocents got hurt in the process.

However, the actual leak of data came about because Ler had downloaded the information and had not kept the data with him at all times, as he was required to do. This enabled Brochez to get his hands on it, and release it. If Ler had

followed protocol, none of this would have happened.

Should MOH have been more open about the security breach once it knew about it?

Like Mr Gan himself said: "It is arguable that MOH should have made a different call."

While openness and transparency are very much desired, especially when mistakes occur, in this case, I not only understand but support MOH's decision to not reveal the confidential data leak back in 2016 and last year when it assessed that the threat had been contained.

Revealing the breach – at a time when the danger of the information going public was small – would

have caused more harm than good.

Yes, the Government must own up if it makes a mistake – but not at the expense of, and causing grief to, innocent victims.

From the feedback given by medical social workers who had contacted the people on the HIV Registry whose identity had been exposed, some were so traumatised that they contemplated suicide.

The thousands of people on the registry are already suffering because of the disease. There was no need to put them through the added anxiety of knowing that their condition was no longer secret, when the leaked data had remained contained.

All that changed when the data

was posted on the Internet. Access to that has since been blocked, but it might be just a temporary reprieve.

Now that it is clear that Brochez still possesses the information, there is only one way to counter it.

That power lies with the people. They can report it if Brochez releases the data again. They can stop it from being disseminated further.

Above all, they can treat people afflicted with HIV with compassion and respect so that the condition is no longer a stigma that has to be kept secret.

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SEE OPINION A22

THE STRAITS TIMES
SINGAPOREAN
OF THE YEAR 2018

PRESENTED BY



ST Singaporean of the Year winner humbled by award

28-year-old recognised for overcoming the odds, helping the needy and interfaith work

Janice Tai
Social Affairs Correspondent

How does one decide what acts of generosity or heroism to recognise, Ms Siti Noor Mastura humbly and philosophically asked as she was announced as The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2018.

“Honestly, I (feel like I) suffer from imposter’s syndrome, so I don’t think I am fully deserving of the award,” the 28-year-old said at the Istana, tears streaming down her face. She was referring to when a person doubts the extent of his or her accomplishment.

Ms Noor Mastura’s award citation recognised her for overcoming the odds, for her passion to help the needy and for her interfaith work.

And she promptly and aptly cited an anecdote, the gist of which can be found in religious

texts, to illustrate her point.

“If we have a person donating \$10 and another donating \$2, you would automatically think the person donating \$10 is more generous. But what if for the person donating the \$2, it is everything that he could possibly have?” said Ms Noor Mastura, adding that everyone has the capacity to do great things.

Ms Noor Mastura, who co-founded non-profit organisation Interfaith Youth Circle, beat 10 other finalists for the award, which is now into its fourth year. Organised by The Straits Times and sponsored by UBS Singapore, the award honours Singaporeans who have put the country on the world map, persevered through incredible adversity or made the community a better place through selfless acts.

Interfaith Youth Circle seeks to promote a better understanding of the role that faith can play in an in-

creasingly divided world. It conducts monthly scriptural reasoning sessions, where people discuss passages from religious texts of different faiths that are on common themes. It also encourages people to host others from different faiths at home during religious festivals.

Ms Noor Mastura also started in 2013 non-profit group Back2Basics, which delivers free halal groceries to the doorsteps of beneficiaries such as the home-bound elderly.

President Halimah Yacob, who is patron of the award, presented her with a \$20,000 cash prize and a trophy at a ceremony at the Istana.

In her speech, Madam Halimah noted that interest in the award has not waned four years after it began. “The Straits Times continues to receive a respectable number of nominations totalling about 74 individuals or groups. This also shows that there are many people out there doing good for the community, and which is acknowledged by the public who have in turn nominated them for the award,” she said.

In the running this year were 11 fi-

nalists, whose ages range from 26 to 78. The 10 who missed out on the top prize each received \$5,000.

They are Thai cave rescuers Douglas Yeo and Poh Kok Wee; teacher Teo Yee Ming; sociologist Teo You Yenn; urban farmer Bjorn Low; technopreneur Annabelle Kwok; blood donor Robert Chew; veteran nurse Harbhajan Singh; Mr Nizar Mohamed Shariff and Free Food for All, a charity that provides free cooked meals for the needy; entrepreneur Elizabeth Tan; and couple Kenneth and Adeline Thong, who are “parents” to young adults.

Fourteen judges went through three rounds of selection to pick 11 finalists, and took into account the results of a public vote. The judging panel included senior editors of The Straits Times, UBS Asia Pacific president Edmund Koh and UBS head of Asean equities Yeoh Choo Guan, social entrepreneur and activist Saleemah Ismail, chef and restaurateur Willin Low, poet and civil servant Aaron Maniam, and youth leader and educator David Hoe.

The inaugural award for 2015

went to Madam Noriza A. Mansor for helping an elderly man who had soiled himself in public, and the 2016 award went to Colin, May and Joseph Schooling for creating Olympic history for Singapore.

The 2017 award was given to Dr Goh Wei Leong and the charity he co-founded called HealthServe, which provides migrant workers with affordable healthcare.

Dr Goh said the win gave him the platform to promote awareness of the needs of migrant workers. A private hospital has since stepped in to subsidise costly medical investigations for foreign workers, and a couple in London who had read about HealthServe in the papers last year came forward to donate a large sum of money and visited migrant workers in Geylang last month.

“The finalists are all very accomplished and inspiring individuals, and I hope this award will give them the platform to further their interests and causes for the common good,” he said.

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EVERYONE CAN DO GREAT THINGS

I don’t think I am fully deserving of the award. Every one of us has the capacity to do great things. How do you decide what is more heroic and what is more generous?



MS SITI NOOR MASTURA



Front row, from left: UBS head of Asean equities Yeoh Choo Guan, UBS Asia Pacific president Edmund Koh, Singaporean of the Year 2018 winner Siti Noor Mastura, UBS chief of staff for Asia Pacific Teo Lay Sie, President Halimah Yacob, Singapore Press Holdings chairman Lee Boon Yang, Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, SPH deputy chief executive Anthony Tan, and nominee Nizar Mohamed Shariff (seated). Second row, from left: Nominees Bjorn Low, Teo You Yenn, Harbhajan Singh, Robert Chew and Teo Yee Ming. Back row, from left: Nominees Kenneth and Adeline Thong, Annabelle Kwok, Elizabeth Tan, Poh Kok Wee and Douglas Yeo. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

Finalists show S’poreans are not mere bystanders: President

The stories of finalists for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year Award show that Singaporeans are not passive bystanders to the plight of others, whether in Singapore or elsewhere, President Halimah Yacob said at the award ceremony at the Istana yesterday.

“The daily humdrum of our existence, mired in work and other responsibilities, has not deadened our souls, and we find nourishment in helping others,” she said.

“The human spirit remains undaunted, and the stories of the nominees are clear examples of how all of us can do something for the betterment of others, so long as we have the heart to do so. We don’t have to wait for others to show the way.”

She added: “If all of us do our

part, no matter how small, we will collectively become an indefatigable force for good.”

Madam Halimah also said she was glad that this year’s event was held at the Istana, as this is the year the Istana celebrates 150 years.

“Even as we remember our past legacies, we constantly strive to create new memories too. The Istana has been celebrating the achievements of Singaporeans in so many different fields, such as social workers and teachers, and this is a fitting addition to recognise our extraordinary Singaporeans,” she said.

Madam Halimah thanked UBS for its continued support of the award, and said she was glad to see more Singapore companies – Singapore Airlines, Millennium Hotels and Resorts Group, Tridente Automobili

and OSIM – coming on board to give their support too.

Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings’ English/Malay/Tamil Media Group and editor of The Straits Times, said in his speech: “We wanted to tell the stories of Singaporeans, living among us, who were doing extraordinary things, to shine a spotlight on their efforts, and in doing so, to uphold the values they embody, as a reflection of the kind of society we would like to see in Singapore.”

These values are all the more important today, he added, as we live in troubled and tumultuous times of sweeping technological and economic change, political populism, a growing sense of inequality and alienation in some communities, and other issues like terrorism and

climate change.

“In the face of all of this, how do we respond?” asked Mr Fernandez. He noted that this year’s finalists all did it in their own special ways to “lead, care, inspire, serve and dare” – whether it is a teacher challenging his charges not to be intimidated by robots but to master them and go on to clinch top international awards, a generous couple who opened their home to young people who needed love, or brave men who responded instinctively to a disaster abroad, rushing to the scene to help save lives.

Mr Edmund Koh, president of UBS Asia Pacific, congratulated this year’s winner, Ms Siti Noor Mastura, as her “mission of promoting understanding and peace among different faiths is a true inspiration

to all of us to further strengthen harmony and inclusion in Singapore”.

He said UBS planned to continue backing the award for more years to come, and urged other sponsors to give even more.

At the award ceremony yesterday, guests enjoyed a range of local dishes prepared by Chef Hoo Zi Hao of Lavish Dine Catering, who won two golds at the Expogast Culinary World Cup last year.

Mr Nizar Mohamed Shariff, one of the finalists, said of Ms Noor Mastura: “At a time when there are so many instances of terrorism, she helps to break away the stigma of religion and encourage conversations on what religion truly teaches, which is care for the vulnerable.”

Janice Tai

STEPPING UP TO HELP OTHERS

The human spirit remains undaunted and the stories of the nominees are clear examples of how all of us can do something for the betterment of others, so long as we have the heart to do so. We don’t have to wait for others to show the way.



PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB

THE STRAITS TIMES
SINGAPOREAN
OF THE YEAR 2018

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Tough childhood spurred her to help others, build bridges

Surviving homelessness and other challenges gave winner courage to serve and work to promote religious harmony

Rahimah Rashid

Ms Siti Noor Mastura, 28, moulded the shackles of her childhood struggle into bridges that connect people through faith and poverty alleviation.

But there were years when The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year had to stay strong, for the sake of her mother and siblings, and hold on to the hope that there would be light beyond the darkness. After the divorce of her parents when she was 17, Ms Noor Mastura,

the second of four girls, and her siblings endured many nights of homelessness and hunger. Over five years, they moved 11 times with their mother. "We reached a point where we just had our belongings in trash bags and carried them from place to place,"

said Ms Noor Mastura. To compound matters, her mother sank into depression, and her older sister struggled with bipolar disorder. Faced with the family's financial challenges, Ms Noor Mastura finished secondary school and went

out to work as a relief and freelance drama teacher. "Those dark times moulded me into the person I am now and gave me the faith and courage to help others," she told The Straits Times yesterday after receiving her award from President Halimah Yacob in a

ceremony at the Istana.

Eventually, her mother's brother came to their rescue and helped them buy a flat. Ms Noor Mastura got her licence as a property agent, and became a flight attendant.

In 2013, she started Back2Basics with two friends, distributing groceries that they paid for out of their own pocket to a few needy families once a month. That has grown into an organisation supporting some 31 families now.

Then, in 2015, she founded the Interfaith Youth Circle (IYC) with a former school classmate, in response to the fragile state of religious harmony, she said.

The year before, she had written a letter, which she e-mailed to 200 churches here, denouncing the atrocities committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group against Christians in Mosul, Iraq. In her letter, she reiterated that Muslims stood in solidarity with

Christians for peace. It garnered many positive responses online and from church leaders.

Encouraged, Ms Noor Mastura became interested in taking part in interfaith dialogues, but found that many of these were only for academics or invited guests.

Upon a friend's recommendation, she attended a Cambridge University summer programme in interfaith work and came back to start IYC.

The non-governmental organisation conducts monthly scriptural reasoning sessions, where people of various faiths discuss religious texts from different faiths, but of the same theme.

It also runs campaigns like Break Bread Build Bridges, which encourages people from a community who celebrate a religious festival to host someone who is not from that faith but would like to experience it or learn more about it. Muslims open their homes to cele-

brate Hari Raya Aidilfitri with strangers from other religions, and Christians do the same during Christmas.

"I want to create safe spaces for our youth to have honest conversations about their faiths," said Ms Noor Mastura, who has hosted several novel interfaith initiatives, such as involving the Jewish community in breaking fast with Muslim Singaporeans during Ramadan as well as holding a dialogue on homosexuality with priests and gay activists last year.

On winning The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award, she said it was a team effort.

"I am very humbled," she said. "I am very certain that this award doesn't just belong to me. Like they say, it takes a whole village to raise a child; it takes a whole community behind this award. There is an entire community behind the award, whether it is my family, (or) the interfaith team."

The award, organised by The Straits Times and sponsored by UBS Singapore, honours Singaporeans who have put the country on the world map, persevered through incredible adversity or made the community a better place through selfless acts. It is now in its fourth year.

Social entrepreneur and activist for children and women Saleemah Ismail said Ms Noor Mastura's work building bridges between faiths among youth "is important work to help mitigate the hate rhetoric and fearmongers in our current climate".

Ms Saleemah, 50, who was also part of the judging panel, added: "Peace comes when we understand and respect each other. And her interfaith work is about helping youth from different faiths to understand and respect each other."

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Commentary

13 unsung heroes who make S'pore better



Rohit Brijnath

In a dignified Istana room of muted, tasteful drapes, where elegant chandeliers hung from a high ceiling, a city's conscience stood radiant on a stage. Thirteen people, draped in smiles and dressed in decency, posed with their President, Madam Halimah Yacob.

Mark Twain would have loved them.

To slightly paraphrase the American humorist, he once noted that "unconsciously we all have a standard by which we measure other people, and if we examine closely we find that this standard is a very simple one, and it is this: We admire them, we envy them, for great qualities we ourselves lack".

People often want to do good but, like most of us, leave it at that. They are troubled by hungry people but go no further than concern. They grate at inequality but don't translate idea into deed. They want to make a contribution to their society but halt at good intentions.

But the hero acts and so do these 13, and it is why we admire them. They have nursed the wounds of patients, dived into unknown waters to find a child and fed the hungry. They have brought faiths together, worked on artificial intelligence and researched inequality in this land. Their virtues lie in action, their merit in reacting. Said Mr Nizar Mohamed Shariff, who runs the charity Free Food for All: "Someone's got to do it."

These 13 people were here, at the official home and office of the President of Singapore, because it was the stately site of the fourth edition of The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award. It is a prize that cannot grow old or ever become irrelevant. Separating goodness, of course, is an unreasonable task but think of it as a merry excuse to gather and honour some of this city's finer folk.

We live in times where we are addicted to the famous and over-celebrate the flamboyant, but this day was a refreshing change. No grand deed was being hyped in this building among the trees, only the simple act recorded. It was an afternoon fittingly without excessive or gaudy ceremony for these were folk of quiet achievement.

Introductions were read out and videos of their work screened, and each story made you pause. It is not necessarily what they gave - food, medicine, time - which mattered but that they gave at all. In a me-first world, this is a you-first tribe. Here was Ms Elizabeth Tan, 33, a businesswoman who also runs an eye clinic in rural India, and there was 78-year-old Harbhajan Singh, who has been a nurse for 50-odd years. Old battles were being fought by Mr Robert Chew, who has donated blood 184 times (and counting), and new dreams spurred by Mr Teo Yee Ming, who teaches robotics to children. As *bandung* was sipped, *putu piring* ingested and expensive ties adjusted, they made us feel inadequate even as they elevated us. These are people to like and also to be like.

In a speech in 1962, Robert F. Kennedy, then the attorney-general of the United States, spoke of the role of the citizen and said: "By that I mean, a great deal more than the right to vote, or to obtain a passport, or even to speak and worship freely." Citizenship is also responsibility. It is duty, it is compassion, it is service to the land (and to human beings beyond these shores), in whatever measure, and it is what these nominees had in common.

For Mr Kenneth Thong, 47, and his wife, Adeline, 39, who open their house to the lost and the lonely, the physically struggling and the emotionally broken, there is no reason to do what they do beyond the utterly simple. "It is the right thing to do," said Mr Thong. People cry for help, but society goes deaf among the city's steel and brick. These two people have good ears.

In the grand story of any land, the government plays a lead role but every citizen has a part. Harmony, for instance, can be stressed by politicians and protected by laws, but everyday folk have to lend a thoughtful hand. It is why Ms Siti Noor Mastura's interfaith dialogues matter, for in a fractious time a young woman, only 28, is asking us to peacefully and honestly talk our way to an understanding of each other.

Ms Noor Mastura was named as The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year and seemed genuinely shocked, cried and thanked her mother. In a way she is like everyone else, and yet in her own way like no one else. "Personally," she said, "I believe my duty here on earth is to be of service."

The nominees shook hands, huddled next to the President and flashes erupted. Next week, this Istana moment will be hung proudly on a variety of living room walls. Then the 13 departed, back to their lives, fated perhaps by their neighbours but soon they will be walking unobtrusively down their suburban street.

These are not flawless folk with burnished halos, yet they make us consider our imperfection. They offer no pious lectures, yet remind us there is a higher purpose to life than selfishness. They are not traditional heroes who will be asked to sign autographs, but we should give quiet thanks for them. For they are our unsung army against selfishness and our unheralded legion against disruption. Individually, they do the simplest thing. They make Singapore better.

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President Halimah Yacob at the award ceremony with (from left) finalists Bjorn Low, Kenneth and Adeline Thong, Teo You Yenn, Robert Chew, Elizabeth Tan, Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, Singapore Press Holdings deputy chief executive Anthony Tan, The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2018 winner Siti Noor Mastura, UBS head of Asean equities Yeeh Choo Guan, Singapore Airlines senior vice-president for sales and marketing Campbell Wilson, UBS co-head wealth management Asia-Pacific August Hatecke, UBS Asia Pacific president Edmund Koh, Tridente Automobili executive chairman Teo Hock Seng, SPH chairman Lee Boon Yang, finalist Annabelle Kwok, Osim International marketing executive Cheryl Ang, and finalists Harbhajan Singh, Douglas Yeo, Nizar Mohamed Shariff, Teo Yee Ming and Poh Kok Wee. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

Flights, hotel stays, cash prizes for winner and finalists

INSPIRING OTHERS TO VOLUNTEER

I hope to inspire more Singaporeans to volunteer locally or abroad, and realise that we all have the power to make a difference in someone's life, whatever our position may be.

And the gift we get is not just the satisfaction from doing so, but gaining perspective so we can improve as people and as a society.



FINALIST ELIZABETH TAN, who organises annual mobile eye clinics for poor communities in remote regions of the Himalayas.

REDUCING TECH DISPARITY

I hope more developers, engineers and researchers can help smaller companies reduce the large technological disparity with them, and (these smaller companies) can stay relevant in the years to come.



FINALIST ANNABELLE KWOK, technopreneur.



Madam Noriza A. Mansor, who was named The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2015, giving President Halimah a bouquet. Madam Noriza won over hearts when she helped an elderly man who soiled himself in public. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

"We understand the importance of connecting, having empathy and the passion to serve and do good. I am proud our hotels can be a part of the Singaporean of the Year Award. It celebrates the best of the Singaporean character," he added.

Mr Edmund Koh, president of UBS Asia Pacific, said it is heartening to see how the award "has grown to be a very special award

that celebrates the triumph of the human spirit, and it is our honour to acknowledge individuals who have gone above and beyond to make a difference in Singapore."

He added: "This year, our finalists continue to do us proud in their extraordinary acts of bravery and kindness. We congratulate all the finalists as they are each deserving in their own way. Our congratulations

to Siti Noor Mastura, whose mission of promoting understanding and peace among different faiths is a true inspiration to all of us to further strengthen harmony and inclusion in Singapore."

At least one finalist has decided to donate his prize money. Hai Sing Catholic School teacher Teo Yee Ming, 44, who was joined by his wife, daughter and niece at the

award ceremony, discussed the matter with his wife.

He intends to give the money and prizes to The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund, which helps students from low-income families yearly. He said that it was the biggest donation he had ever given. "The initiative serves school children and I am a teacher. For me, that is meaningful," he said.



(From left) Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, ST Singaporean of the Year 2018 winner Siti Noor Mastura, President Halimah Yacob and UBS Asia Pacific president Edmund Koh at the ceremony. Ms Noor Mastura's award citation recognised her for overcoming the odds, for her passion to help the needy and for her interfaith work. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID



(From left) Mr Kenneth Thong and his wife Adeline chatting with fellow finalist Nizar Mohamed Shariff and his relative Shaikh Ahmad Ali Nizar after the award ceremony. ST PHOTO: STEPHANIE YEOU



Finalists and other guests at the ceremony. President Halimah said she was glad that this year's event was held at the Istana, as the Istana celebrates 150 years this year. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO



Ava Killick, with her mother and award finalist Elizabeth Tan, having a chat at the ceremony with Mr Colin Schooling, who won the 2016 award with his wife May and son, Olympic gold medalist Joseph Schooling. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

A passion for helping others



SCAN TO WATCH



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Spike in online talk critical of S'pore during spat with KL

Incident shows how foreign interference can take place: Edwin Tong

Adrian Lim
Political Correspondent

When Singapore's dispute with Malaysia over maritime and airspace issues late last year was top news, there was a "curious" spike in online comments critical of the Republic on social media, said Senior Minister of State for Law Edwin Tong.

These posts were made using what were essentially anonymous accounts, Mr Tong disclosed in Parliament yesterday.

He also said that on the issue of

traffic jams at land checkpoints, these "avatar accounts", with profile photos that do not show the user's face, account for about 40 per cent of comments on the alternative media's social media pages.

This shows how foreign actors can interfere in Singapore's politics through online campaigns and false information, he said.

But steps are being taken to update the laws later this year to counter such threats, he added.

As for the case of the Singapore-Malaysia dispute, Mr Tong said: "We do not know who these suspicious accounts belong to. Nor do we know

if they are being coordinated by foreign actors. But it is clear that these accounts have sought to give and create an artificial impression to netizens of the opposition to Singapore's position, at a time of heightened bilateral difficulties."

Mr Tong was replying to Ms Cheng Li Hui (Tampines GRC), who asked if there had been instances of foreign interference in Singapore.

He pinpointed last year's SingHealth hacking incident, saying the cyber attackers - who are advanced and typically state-linked - wanted to extract the health data of Singaporeans, particularly that of

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

"Cyber hackings are often deployed in concert with hostile information campaigns to search for information that can be weaponised," he added.

Earlier, Mr Tong described how foreign actors had interfered in the politics and elections in countries such as the United States and France.

"No country is immune. This is asymmetric information warfare, fought in a theatre and an era with no distinction between war and peace," he said.

"In this battlefield, Singapore, an open, democratic, digitally connected and diverse country, is especially vulnerable.

"We are a young country with sensitive fault-lines that foreign actors can exploit to foment distrust and ill-will among our various communities," he added.

Mr Tong said the nations he highlighted had learnt hard lessons and were taking action to expose and counter such interference.

To ward off foreign interference in local politics and elections, Singapore is developing a strategy on two fronts. Firstly, to sensitise Singaporeans to the threat and nurture a discerning public, he said.

"We are our own first line of defence. We must learn to be sceptical of and be able to discern falsehoods or half-truths, and detect foreign actors and their attempts to interfere in our politics."

Secondly, the legal framework will be updated and enhanced to counter hostile information campaigns. Mr Tong said the new laws have two broad objectives.

One, to let the Government "act swiftly and effectively to disrupt and counter false, misleading and inauthentic information and narratives spread by foreign actors".

"We must also be able to pre-emptively expose clandestine foreign interference campaigns," he added.

Two, to prevent foreign actors from manipulating politically involved individuals and organisations through the use of proxies, funding and donations.

He cited the case of Dr Huang Jing, a former professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, whom the Government identified as an agent of influence acting on behalf of a foreign country. Dr Huang was stripped of his permanent residency status in 2017.

"We must not allow foreign actors to undermine our political sovereignty, nor our ability to make our own choices on how we want to govern our country and live our lives," Mr Tong said.

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WARDING OFF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

We must not allow foreign actors to undermine our political sovereignty, nor our ability to make our own choices on how we want to govern our country and live our lives.



SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW
EDWIN TONG

Foreign countries hit by hostile information campaigns

In Parliament yesterday, Senior Minister of State for Law Edwin Tong described how foreign actors sought to interfere with the domestic politics of countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and France.



Then presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron at a campaign rally in Paris during the 2017 French presidential election. Foreign actors leaked hacked data from Mr Macron's campaign just two days before the second round of voting. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

United States

A foreign hostile information campaign sought to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election and undermine democracy.

HOW: Fake social media accounts were used to impersonate real Americans, and to infiltrate and influence society. The accounts spread falsehoods and false narratives on divisive socio-political issues such as race, gun control and immigration.

Bots, or autonomous programs, along with digital advertisements were used by the foreign actor to amplify

its reach and viewpoints rapidly, giving the impression that such views were popular.

Two fake Facebook accounts with opposing ideologies were cultivated, and a protest and counter-protest were organised at the same place and time, leading real American protesters to show up.

REACH: Over two years, about 126 million US Facebook users were exposed to content generated by the foreign operation. The campaign polarised and generated deep suspicion in American society and against its institutions.

United Kingdom

Domestic grievances were exploited to turn the British against UK and European Union institutions and policies in the referendum on Brexit.

HOW: Social media, bots and fake accounts were used to spread false claims. A steady stream of anti-immigration falsehoods by foreign-linked social media accounts made people feel threatened and built a narrative of a British government that failed to protect its citizens.

REACH: A study suggested that more than 150,000 foreign-linked accounts tweeted more than 45,000 pro-Brexit messages in the last 48 hours of the campaign.

France

Foreign actors tried to interfere with the 2017 French presidential election.

HOW: Just two days before the second round of voting, 9GB of data hacked from then presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron's campaign was leaked online.

REACH: In just 3½ hours, the leak was tweeted 47,000 times, with some suspicious Twitter accounts, likely bots in action, posting more than 150 tweets an hour.

HDB launches 3,739 flats in first sales exercise of the year

Rachel Au-Yong
Housing Correspondent

The first Housing Board sales exercise this year includes two projects in Kallang/Whampoa, which experts expect to be popular despite having prices that are just shy of

those of resale flats in the area.

A new four-room flat in the mature estate costs \$598,000 on average, only 7.4 per cent cheaper than the average price of resale flats in the area, leading observers to believe that the flats may find more traction with second-timers.

In comparison, new flats in the non-mature towns of Jurong West and Sengkang are about 20 per cent to 33 per cent cheaper than their resale counterparts.

HDB yesterday launched 3,739 flats, including 3,162 Build-To-Order (BTO) units in five projects across the three towns. Prices start from \$95,000 for a two-room flexi flat in Jurong West, and from \$523,000 for a four-room flat in Kallang/Whampoa. These prices exclude grants.

The Kallang/Whampoa projects are likely to be the most popular because of their attractive locations.

Besides its proximity to the Central Business District, the 411-unit Kallang Breeze is less than 400m away from Kallang MRT station, and is also near the Kallang River. Meanwhile, the 444-unit Towner Crest is next to Boon Keng station.

But the high prices mean the flats are likely to attract more second-timers than new buyers, said ERA Realty key executive officer Eugene Lim. In a mature estate, only 5 per cent of the flats are reserved for second-timers, though excess flats may go to them.

OrangeTee & Tie research head Christine Sun said: "Some young couples may consider older HDB resale flats in some mature estates to be more value for money and as attractively located."

As of 5pm yesterday, there were 1,654 applications for 2,225 three- and four-room flats there. But the application rate for first-timers was 0.7 per unit, almost half that of second-timers at 1.3 per unit.

PropNex Realty chief executive Ismail Gafour said he expects the final application rate to be between four and five per unit - less than half the 12.1 per unit for four-room flats at the last Kallang/Whampoa launch in November 2016 - because of the projects' "premium prices".

That is not to say flats in the non-mature towns will remain on the shelf. Mr Lim said the two projects in Jurong West should be fairly well received as both are near MRT stations - Pioneer and Boon Lay. Flats are also "attractively priced", starting at \$257,000 excluding grants.

Meanwhile, the Sengkang flats are near Thanggam LRT station and The Seletar Mall. But as they are not near an MRT station, they may be less popular, he added.

However, Ms Sun noted that Sengkang was one of two non-mature towns to see a price increase for four- and five-room flats last year.

Also up for grabs are 577 Re-Offer of Balance Flats (ROF), comprising 173 two-room flexi units, 166 three-room flats, 129 four-room units, 10 five-room units, 96 three-generation flats and three executive flats.

Applicants can apply for a flat ei-

The Kallang/Whampoa projects are likely to be the most popular because of their attractive locations. Besides its proximity to the Central Business District, the 411-unit Kallang Breeze is less than 400m away from Kallang MRT station, and is also near the Kallang River. Meanwhile, the 444-unit Towner Crest is next to Boon Keng station.

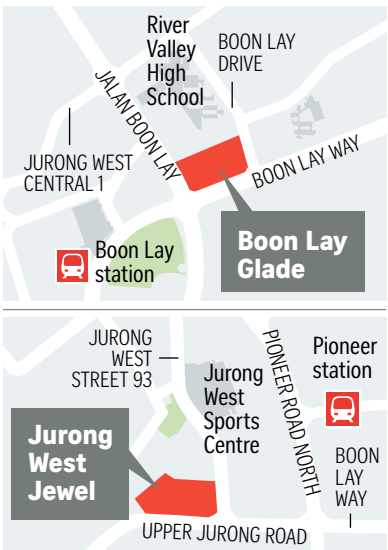
First BTO launch of the year

Sengkang



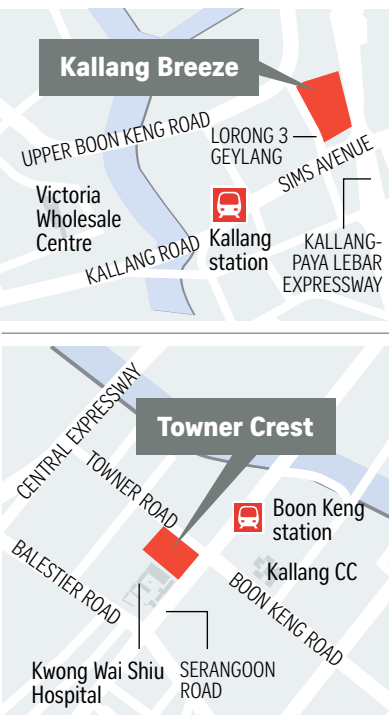
Project	Flat mix	No. of units
Fernvale Vines	Two-room Flexi	437
	Three-room	92
	Four-room	216
	Five-room	148
	3Gen	40
Total		933

Jurong West



Project	Flat mix	No. of units
Boon Lay Glade	Two-room Flexi	313
	Three-room	64
	Four-room	274
	Five-room	97
	3Gen	27
Jurong West Jewel	Two-room Flexi	187
	Three-room	102
	Four-room	157
	Five-room	153
Total		1,374

Kallang / Whampoa



Project	Flat mix	No. of units
Kallang Breeze	Three-room	88
	Four-room	323
Towner Crest	Three-room	104
	Four-room	340
Total		855

Source: HDB STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

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Thai party to carry on with campaign despite threat of dissolution

Thai Raksa Chart pledges to stay in election race after thwarted bid to nominate Princess

Tan Hui Yee
Indochina Bureau Chief
In Bangkok

The Thai political party that was thwarted in its bid to nominate a princess for the post of prime minister put on a brave face yesterday under threat of dissolution, pledging to carry on with its campaign for the March 24 election.

"We as a political party have made a commitment to the people and our members to take part in this election," Thai Raksa Chart party leader Preechapol Pongpanit said yesterday at the party headquarters. "We are sincere in our wish to see the country move forward."

He said he was not concerned with the possibility that his party may be dissolved for flouting election rules.

"We have followed all rules and regulations," he told Thai media. "Now, we are running our campaigns and getting ready for the election. Whatever decision made will be heeded by us."

He sidestepped reporters' questions on whether the party's executives will resign.

"We have good intentions," he said. "We will humbly abide by the royal order."

Thai Raksa Chart stunned the country last Friday when it nominated Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya – the elder sister of King Maha Vajiralongkorn – for the post of prime minister. New election rules imposed after the 2014 coup require political parties to publicise the names of individuals they intend to propose as prime minister before the election.

But the monarch intervened late that same day, saying in a statement that Princess Ubolratana "has been maintaining her status as a member of the Chakri royal family" despite relinquishing her status in 1972.

"Any attempt to involve a high-level member of the royal family in the political process, by whatever means, would be tantamount to breaching time-honoured royal traditions, customs and national culture," the statement added. "Such action must be deemed a transgression and most inappropriate."

On Monday, political activist Srisuwan Janya submitted a petition to the Election Commission to dissolve the Thai Raksa Chart party.

The commission also disqualified Princess Ubolratana from the election, citing the king's order. It released instead a list of 69 prime ministerial candidates that had been nominated by 45 political parties taking part in the election.

Commissioners met yesterday but did not conclude on what action they would take with regard to Thai Raksa Chart.

Like the Pheu Thai Party – which won the 2011 election but was ousted by a coup in 2014 – Thai Raksa Chart is linked to fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The tycoon's Thai Rak Thai party won the 2001 election, only to be thrown out by a coup in 2006. The party was subsequently disbanded for electoral fraud and its key members banned from politics for five years.

Former deputy prime minister Chaturon Chaisaeng, who used to be a Thai Rak Thai member and is now executive chairman of Thai Raksa Chart, tweeted yesterday: "The phrase 'ticks jumping off dying dog' is circulating now... I don't think Thai Raksa Chart will be dissolved, but if it will, I will be the last one here, like when I was with Thai Rak Thai. (I am the) tick that doesn't jump."

Meanwhile, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission yesterday suspended

a Thaksin-linked television station for 15 days, saying that it spread misinformation that could heighten social divisions. The station – Voice TV – is owned by Thaksin's children.

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Campaigning is in full swing in Bangkok, which has been plastered with electoral posters, including one for a Thai Raksa Chart candidate (right). Its leader Preechapol Pongpanit said he was not concerned that his party may be dissolved for flouting election rules, and that it had followed all rules and regulations. PHOTO: EPA-EFE



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US Undersecretary for International Affairs David Malpass (centre) and his negotiation team setting out on the second day of trade talks in Beijing yesterday. The US wants China to commit to deeper reforms to a state-driven economic model that Washington says hurts American companies. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Trump wants to meet Xi very soon over trade war: Adviser

Sign of optimism amid US-China talks but enforcement by Beijing of any deal may be sticking point

WASHINGTON/BEIJING • The White House says President Donald Trump still wants to meet his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in an effort to end the trade war, a sign of optimism as negotiators from the world's two biggest economies start their latest round of talks this week.

"He wants to meet President Xi very soon," White House adviser Kellyanne Conway told Fox News on Monday.

"This President wants a deal. He wants it to be fair to Americans and American workers and American interests."

Uncertainty whether the leaders will meet to finalise an agreement has stoked concerns that negotiations are faltering as the March 1 deadline approaches. If there is no deal by then, Mr Trump has threatened to more than double the rate of tariffs on US\$200 billion (S\$272 billion) worth of Chinese imports.

Negotiators from both sides are meeting this week in Beijing, with US officials pressing China to commit to deeper reforms to a state-driven economic model that they say hurts American companies.

Mid-level officials began discussions on Monday in preparation for two days of talks starting tomorrow involving US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He.

Aides to Mr Trump say this week's talks are important as they need to demonstrate credible progress to both the US leader and financial markets. But the two sides are only just starting the work of drafting a common document and still tussling over how a deal may be enforced, which US officials have repeatedly called a crucial element.

As a result, some aides privately acknowledge the most likely scenario is for the March 1 deadline to be extended and for tariffs on some US\$200 billion of Chinese im-



US President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping in a November 2017 file photo. It is possible that the two may get together next month at Mr Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, says White House adviser Kellyanne Conway.

Facing an economic slowdown at home, Beijing has a strong motivation to address US demands and put an end to the trade war. It has fast-tracked approval of a law that would ban theft of intellectual property and forced technology transfers, but the question is how much more it can compromise. With Washington now pushing a plan of prioritising spending on artificial intelligence research, it will be difficult to talk China out of its policies to dominate advanced technologies.

ports not to be raised to 25 per cent as Mr Trump has threatened.

But Mr David Malpass, part of the US delegation now in Beijing, yesterday said the March 1 deadline for a trade deal would not be extended, the South China Morning Post reported.

Chinese officials have proposed that Mr Xi and Mr Trump meet on the southern island of Hainan around the time of the annual Boao Forum for Asia, which runs from March 26-29, the Post said, according to a source briefed on the suggestion. But the proposal was preliminary and Washington had yet to respond to the idea, the source said.

It is possible the leaders may get together next month at Mr Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, Ms Conway said on Monday, when asked about a report from news agency Axios to that effect. Mr Trump has said no deal will be final until he meets Mr Xi.

"He has forged a mutually respectful relationship with President Xi," Ms Conway said. "They will meet again soon."

The last round of talks in Washington late last month resulted in

China importing American soybeans as it implemented promises to buy more US goods.

While those purchases will provide relief to US farmers, there has been no breakthrough on the structural issues separating the two nations, such as industrial policy, government subsidies, protection of intellectual property or forced transfers of technology.

Facing an economic slowdown at home, Beijing has a strong motivation to address US demands and put an end to the trade war.

It has fast-tracked approval of a law that would ban theft of intellectual property and forced technology transfers, but the question is how much more it can compromise.

With Washington now pushing a plan of prioritising spending on artificial intelligence research, it will be difficult to talk China out of its policies to dominate advanced technologies.

And with the March 1 deadline approaching, speculation is growing that it will be hard for negotiators to agree to the complete deal demanded by President Trump. BLOOMBERG

News analysis

No certainty of US-China trade deal before truce ends: Experts



Chong Koh Ping

China Correspondent
In Shanghai

The latest round of trade talks between China and the United States, slated to take place this week in Beijing, looks set to be the last before the 90-day truce between the two sides ends on March 1.

But Chinese analysts are uncertain if a deal is possible by then. They said the ball is now in the US' court, and it depends on whether Washington is willing to accept "reasonable conditions" proposed by Beijing to resolve the disputes.

Dr Mei Xinyu, an expert close to the Chinese Commerce Ministry, said: "This all started because the Americans are being unreasonable. If they choose to continue to insist on all their demands, then it'd be hard to reach a resolution."

He added that many contentious points still remain after the recent rounds of talks, even though both sides had reached a consensus on a number of issues.

"We should remain calm. As always, we will make the best efforts for a resolution but also prepare ourselves for the worst possible outcome," said Dr Mei, who is a researcher with the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing.

The ongoing trade war between the world's two largest economies centres on China's trade practices – such as forced technology transfer, the lack of intellectual property rights protection, and heavy subsidies of state-owned enterprises – which the US has deemed as unfair.

Professor Shi Yinhong, from Renmin University in Beijing, said there are two major areas where both sides would find it hard to reach common ground. The first is intellectual property rights. The second is the demands by the US for China to subject reforms of its trade practices to "ongoing verification and effective enforcement".

A new foreign investment law is already in the works to address the issue of forced technology transfer. The new law, which bans such transfers and illegal government "interference" in foreign companies, is likely to be passed at China's annual parliamentary session next month.

Prof Shi noted that the US has toned down its rhetoric on China's practice of subsidising its state-owned enterprises.

He said: "In recent weeks, the US has launched unprecedented attacks on China, criticising it for stealing US intellectual property."

This looks to be one key sticking point at this last stage of negotiations.

"Basically, it all depends on the US. It does not have to make any concessions, whereas China has to make structural changes (to its trade and industrial policies). Some of these are things that China is unwilling or unable to accede to," Prof Shi said.

He predicted a "diluted" deal by March 1.

"This means there will be still be frictions farther down the road," he said.

Analysts are also uncertain about what the eventual deal, if there is one, will look like.

Would it mean reverting to before July 6 last year, when there were no additional tariffs on Chinese products?

Or would it remain at the status quo of 10 per cent tariffs, with no further escalation?

Prof Shi said he thinks the US has deliberately kept it vague. "Such vagueness is very odd. But I doubt it will go back to where it was before July 6," he said, adding that the stand-off between both countries was likely to continue for the long term.

Dr Mei said US President Donald Trump suffers from a "trust deficit" with the Chinese people right now. Hence, even if a deal is reached, it remains to be seen if the US can eventually sign off on it.

"The issue of trust is a major problem here as well," he said.

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BALL IN U.S. COURT

Basically, it all depends on the US. It does not have to make any concessions, whereas China has to make structural changes (to its trade and industrial policies). Some of these are things that China is unwilling or unable to accede to.



PROFESSOR SHI YINHONG, from Renmin University in Beijing. He expects a "diluted" deal by March 1, which means there will still be "frictions farther down the road".

Grief-stricken owners offer care instructions to bonsai thieves

TOKYO • Ms Fuyumi Iimura has a message for whoever broke into her family's expansive garden outside Tokyo and made off with a small fortune's worth of some of the planet's most beautiful bonsai trees: Please water them.

Over a period of several nights, a team of bonsai bandits stole the cream of Ms Iimura's collection, regarded as some of the most exquisite in existence, CNN reported.

It was like losing a child, she said in a Facebook post. The only thing worse would be if the trees were not properly cared for and centuries' worth of work withered away because of neglect.

"I want whoever took the bonsai to make sure they are watered. The shimpaku lived for 400 years. It needs care and can't survive a week without water," Ms Iimura said in the grief-stricken post on her Facebook page, referring to the rare junipers that were stolen.

"They can live forever – even after we're gone, if they receive the proper care."

Clearly, the thieves knew what they were doing in last month's heist. They stole a total of seven trees, but those were the most expensive in Ms Iimura's collection, according to CNN.

Combined, the plants were worth US\$118,000 (S\$160,000), but could fetch much more on illicit markets.

"We treated these miniature trees like our children," Ms Iimura said. "There are no words to describe how we feel. It's like having your limbs lopped off."

Her husband Mr Seiji Iimura is a fifth-generation bonsai master, whose family has been cultivating bonsai since the Edo period, which ended in 1868.

Ms Iimura's Facebook profile is full of pictures of bonsai trees: mature trees in their garden, younger specimens and pre-bonsai seedlings at a greenery fair.

But if the bonsai were children, the shimpaku was clearly the favourite, a 400-year-old cover model of a tree whose undulating



Last month, thieves stole seven bonsai trees, worth a small fortune, from fifth-generation bonsai master Seiji Iimura's garden outside Tokyo, including the one pictured. PHOTO: FACEBOOK/ SEIJI IIMURA

lines are straight out of a storybook.

Shimpaku junipers, which are increasingly endangered in the wild, are found in difficult-to-access cliff areas, according to the World Bonsai Friendship Federation.

Stories that sound like mythical fables abound of bonsai collectors risking their lives on Japanese mountainsides to collect the trees.

The Iimuras' shimpaku had a similar backstory.

It had been taken from a mountain more than four centuries ago, and Mr Iimura's family had gradu-

ally culled the tree down to its current size – 0.9m tall and more than 0.6m wide.

It dotted posters for a bonsai fair.

Ms Iimura snapped photos of the tree topped with snow, its needles covered in sparkling ice crystals.

The couple had hoped to enter it for a contest in coming months.

The thieves also made off with other trees, also rare shimpaku.

"An individual well-versed in bonsai must have been involved in the theft," Mr Iimura told the newspaper. WASHINGTON POST

N. Korea nuke arsenal grows but threat lower: Study

Pyongyang likely has up to 7 more N-weapons but improvements limited by testing freeze

WASHINGTON • North Korea has continued to produce bomb fuel while in denuclearisation talks with the United States and may have produced enough in the past year to add as many as seven nuclear weapons to its arsenal, according to a study released just weeks before a planned second summit between leaders of the two countries.

However, Pyongyang's freeze in nuclear and missile testing since 2017 means that North Korea's

weapons programme probably poses less of a threat than it did at the end of that year, the report by Stanford University's Centre for International Security and Cooperation found.

Dr Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the US Los Alamos weapons laboratory in New Mexico who is now at Stanford and was one of the report's authors, told Reuters analysis of satellite imagery showed North Korea's production of bomb fuel continued last year.

He said spent fuel generated from operation of the 5MW reactor at North Korea's main nuclear plant at Yongbyon in 2016-18 appeared to have been reprocessed starting in May and would have produced an estimated 5-8kg of weapons-grade plutonium.

This combined with production of perhaps 150kg of highly enriched uranium may have allowed North Korea to increase the number of weapons in its arsenal by between five and seven, the Stanford report said.

Dr Hecker's team had estimated the size of North Korea's arsenal in 2017 at 30, bringing a possible current total of 37 weapons. US intelligence is not certain how many nuclear warheads North Korea has.

Last year, the US Defence Intelligence Agency's estimate of about 50 nuclear warheads was at the high end, while analysts have given a range of 20 to 60.

The Stanford report said that while North Korea was likely to have continued work on warhead miniaturisation and to ensure they can stand up to delivery via intercontinental ballistic missiles, the halt in testing greatly limited its ability to make improvements.

"They have continued the machinery to turn out plutonium and highly enriched uranium," Dr Hecker said. "But it also depends on weaponisation – the design, build and test, and then the delivery."

"When they ended missile testing, those things rolled backwards. So when I look at the whole spectrum, to me North Korea ... is less dangerous today than it was at the end of 2017, in spite of the fact that they may have made another five to seven weapons worth of nuclear material."

The Stanford experts said it was their assessment that "North Korea cannot deliver a nuclear warhead with any measure of confidence to the US mainland", although Dr Hecker said its nuclear weapons were a real threat to Japan and South Korea.

Dr Hecker said it was understandable that North Korea should have continued its weapons work, given that it had reached no specific agreement in the latest talks with the US to stop that work.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un pledged during an unprecedented first summit with President Donald Trump in Singapore last June to work towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

There has been little concrete progress since, but in September, Mr Kim expressed willingness to take steps, including the permanent dismantlement of nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, in return for "corresponding measures" by the US.

US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun held three days of talks in Pyongyang last week to prepare for a second Trump-Kim summit due to be held in Hanoi on Feb 27 and 28. REUTERS

Spent fuel generated from operation of the 5 megawatt reactor at North Korea's main nuclear plant at Yongbyon in 2016-18 appeared to have been reprocessed starting in May and would have produced an estimated 5-8kg of weapons-grade plutonium.



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Chinese student regrets ‘pudding tantrum’

She may be deported after sparking outrage in Philippines for hurling soya pudding at cop

Raul Dancel
Philippines Correspondent
In Manila

A Chinese arts student who sparked public outrage in the Philippines after she threw a cup of soya pudding at a police officer has expressed remorse over her behaviour.

This comes as lawyers for the immigration bureau recommend that Zhang Jiale be deported.

“I (was) really in a bad mood, and I was not able to control my emotion... I feel so regretful,” she told GMA News on Monday in jail.

“I’m really, really sorry. I really ask if it’s possible to have another chance for me... I really like the Philippines... I really love Filipinos,” said the 23-year-old freshman at the SoFA Design Institute.

Zhang, whose father is an investor, has been living in the Philippines for six years.

The immigration bureau said yesterday that its lawyers “have found

probable cause” to deport her. Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente added: “The bureau will not tolerate such acts, as this shows disrespect to the country.”

But Zhang’s lawyer Sandra Respal called the incident “a very minor omission, which just went viral”.

In the incident on Saturday, police officer William Cristobal stopped Zhang from going into a Metro Rail Transit (MRT) station in Manila as she was holding a cup of soya pudding. He told Zhang that she would have to finish it before she could enter the station.

The government has banned certain liquid and gel items on the MRT because of reports that militants are planning to bomb public transport systems in Manila.

Zhang argued with the officer and in an outburst, hurled her cup of pudding at his chest.

A photo of the visibly upset Zhang and the policeman with his soiled shirt, as well as a video of the altercation, went viral on social media.



Across Facebook and Twitter, Zhang was derided for her arrogance and for being disrespectful. Some said her behaviour reflected the purportedly low regard many Chinese had for the Philippines, on account of President Rodrigo Duterte’s policy to warm relations with China in exchange for investments for his ambitious US\$169 bil-

lion (S\$230 billion) infrastructure-building programme.

Many Filipinos believe his pivot towards China is encouraging hordes of Chinese to move to the Philippines, taking away jobs from locals and jacking up property prices. Many are also unhappy Mr Duterte has glossed over territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea,



Immigration bureau lawyers “have found probable cause” to deport Zhang Jiale (left) over the incident in which the Chinese student threw soya pudding at a police officer (above). PHOTOS: PHILIPPINE NATIONAL POLICE, PAU MESIAS/FACEBOOK

as he courts Chinese investors.

Zhang, who has been charged with “direct assault, disobedience... and unjust vexation”, could be jailed for between four months and four years, if found guilty.

The police officer, meanwhile, received a medal for keeping his cool. “I just did what our... (police) chief wanted us to do, which is to have a lot of patience and do what is right for our country.”

Some Philippine leaders have joined in the criticism of Zhang. Vice-President Leni Robredo called

her actions “disrespectful” and an “insult to all Filipinos”.

But Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin has warned that the outrage could provoke an equally emotional response in China, which could affect Filipinos working there, and those in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

He said while Zhang deserved to be charged, deporting her would be an overreaction. “She was flinging taho, not encroaching on our national territory,” he added.

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China postpones NZ tourism campaign

WELLINGTON • China has postponed a major tourism campaign in New Zealand just days before its launch while Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s visit to Beijing has been further delayed as concerns mount that China’s growing influence in the Pacific is straining ties.

Ms Ardern yesterday acknowledged there were “complexities” in the relationship with China, but dismissed concerns of a rift with New Zealand’s largest trading partner. “Our relationship with China is a complex relationship, and sometimes, it will have its challenges,” she told TVNZ.

New Zealand yesterday said Beijing had postponed an event to launch the China-New Zealand Year of Tourism 2019 in Wellington next week.

And Ms Ardern told reporters that dates for her trip to China, planned for the end of last year, still have not been finalised. She said: “I have been issued with an invitation to visit China – that has not changed. We continue to find dates that would work.”

Ties with China have been tense under Ms Ardern’s government, which has openly raised concerns about Beijing’s growing influence in the South Pacific. The government has also rejected Chinese telecoms giant Huawei’s first local bid to build a 5G mobile network.

Opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges blamed Ms Ardern and her deputy Winston Peters for “steadily deteriorating relations” with China, and said ties were at the worst point ever.

Opponents and media reports questioned if the Air New Zealand flight that was recently refused entry to China was linked to the issue of deteriorating bilateral ties.

The airline, the New Zealand government and Chinese authorities have all said it was due to an administrative issue.

The aircraft was heading to Shanghai but was forced to return to Auckland after several hours in the air on Saturday as paperwork for the flight included references to Taiwan, Stuff news website reported.

In a statement, Air New Zealand said a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner that joined its fleet late last year was not yet certified to fly to China but was “unfortunately assigned” for the Shanghai flight. As the original application had lapsed, a new one was submitted, it added.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying blamed the flight’s temporary deployment hiccup as a reason for the denial of authorisation to land in China, citing news reports she read online.

She said: “This airplane failed to obtain a landing permit with its destination, and decided on its own accord to return en route.”

Ms Ardern dismissed concerns that the returned flight was a sign of strained ties between the two countries, saying the plane was not registered. “That was a consequence,” she added.

REUTERS, BLOOMBERG

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A third of earth’s insect species facing extinction

Habitat change – deforestation, urbanisation, conversion to farmland – is biggest cause: Study

PARIS • Nearly half of all insect species worldwide are in rapid decline and a third could disappear altogether, according to a study warning of dire consequences for crop pollination and natural food chains.

“Unless we change our way of producing food, insects as a whole will go down the path of extinction in a few decades,” concluded the peer-reviewed study, which is set for publication in April.

The recent decline in bugs that fly, crawl, burrow and skitter across still water is part of a gathering “mass extinction”, only the sixth in the last half-billion years.

“We are witnessing the largest extinction event on earth since the late Permian and Cretaceous periods,” the authors noted.

The Permian end-game 252 million years ago snuffed out more than 90 per cent of the planet’s life forms, while the abrupt finale of the Cretaceous 66 million years ago saw the demise of land dinosaurs.

“We estimate the current proportion of insect species in decline – 41 per cent – to be twice as high as that of vertebrates,” Dr Francisco Sanchez-Bayo of the University of Sydney and Dr Kris Wyckhuys of the University of Queensland in Australia reported. “At present, a third of all insect species are threatened with extinction.” An additional 1 per cent join their ranks every year, they estimated.

Insect biomass – sheer collective weight – is declining annually by about 2.5 per cent worldwide. “Only decisive action can avert a catastrophic collapse of nature’s ecosystems,” the authors cautioned.

Restoring wilderness areas and a drastic reduction in the use of pesticides and chemical fertiliser are likely the best way to slow the insect loss, they said.

The study, to be published in the journal *Biological Conservation*, pulled together data from more than 70 datasets from across the

globe, some dating back more than a century.

By a large margin, habitat change – deforestation, urbanisation, conversion to farmland – emerged as the biggest cause of insect decline and extinction threat. Next was pollution and the widespread use of pesticides in commercial agriculture.

The recent collapse, for example, of many bird species in France was traced to the use of insecticides on industrial crops such as wheat, barley, corn and wine grapes.

Experts estimate that flying insects across Europe have declined 80 per cent on average, causing bird populations to drop by more than 400 million in three decades.

Only a few species of insects – mainly in the tropics – are thought to have suffered due to climate change, while some in northern climes have expanded their range as temperatures warm.

In the long run, however, scientists fear that global warming could become another major driver of insect demise. Up to now, rising concern about biodiversity loss has mostly focused on big mammals, birds and amphibians. But insects comprise about two-thirds of all terrestrial species, and have been the foundation of key ecosystems since emerging almost 400 million years ago.

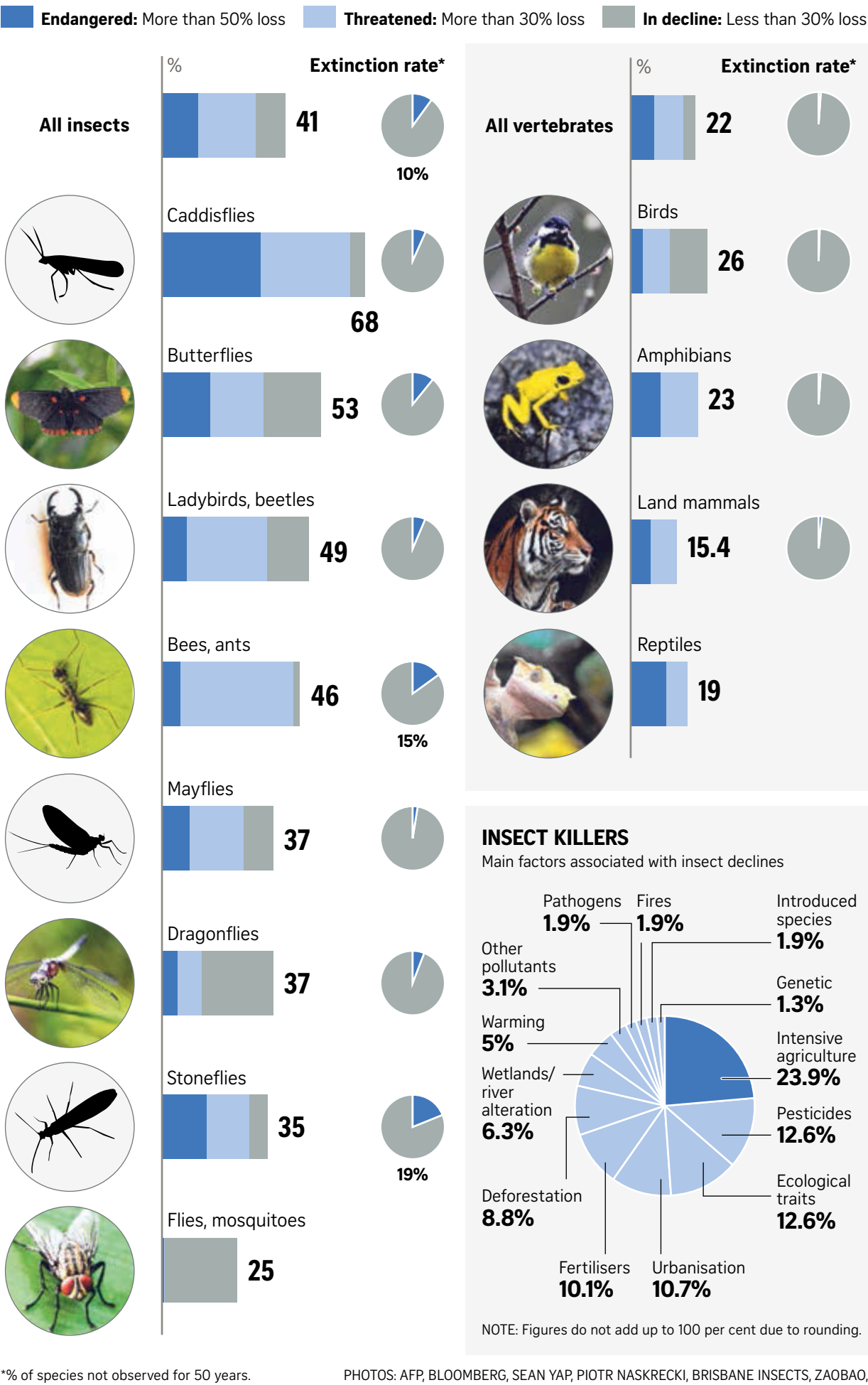
“The essential role that insects play as food items of many vertebrates is often forgotten,” the researchers said. Moles, hedgehogs, anteaters, lizards, amphibians, most bats, many birds and fish all feed on insects or depend on them for rearing their offspring.

Other insects filling the void left by declining species probably cannot compensate for the sharp drop in biomass, the study said.

Insects are also the world’s top pollinators – 75 per cent of 115 top global food crops depend on animal pollination, including cocoa, coffee, almonds and cherries.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Insects in global decline



PHOTOS: AFP, BLOOMBERG, SEAN YAP, PIOTR NASKRECKI, BRISBANE INSECTS, ZAOBAO, LA SALLE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, SIPA ASIA, NG SOR LUAN
Sources: AFP, BIOLOGICAL CONSERVATION, THE GUARDIAN STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

The Inuit communities on the western coast of Greenland. Mining of sand and gravel could boost the economy for Greenland's population of 56,000 who have wide powers of self-rule within Denmark but rely heavily on subsidies from Copenhagen.
PHOTO: EXODUS TRAVELS

As ice melts, Greenland could turn into big sand exporter: Scientists

OSLO • Greenland could start to export sand in a rare positive spin-off from global warming that is melting the island’s vast ice sheet and washing large amounts of sediment into the sea, scientists have said.

Mining of sand and gravel, widely used in the construction industry, could boost the economy for Greenland’s population of 56,000 who have wide powers of self-rule within Denmark but rely heavily on subsidies from Copenhagen.

By mining sand, “Greenland could benefit from the challenges brought by climate change”, a team

of scientists in Denmark and the United States wrote in the journal *Nature Sustainability* on Monday.

The study, headlined “Promises and perils of sand exploitation in Greenland”, said the Arctic island would have to assess risks of coastal mining, especially to fisheries.

Rising temperatures are melting the Greenland ice sheet, which locks up enough water to raise global sea levels by about 7m if it ever all thawed. The result: more sand and gravel being washed into coastal fjords.

“You can think of it (the melting

ice) as a tap that pours out sediment to the coast,” said lead author Mette Bendixen, a researcher at the University of Colorado’s Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research.

Worldwide demand for sand totalled about 9.55 billion tonnes in 2017 with a market value of US\$99.5 billion (S\$135.4 billion) and is projected to reach almost US\$481 billion in 2100, driven by rising demand and likely shortages, the study said. That means a rare opportunity for Greenland.

“Normally the Arctic peoples are among those who really feel climate change – the eroding coast, less permafrost,” said Ms Bendixen. “This is a unique situation because of the melting ice sheet.”

Mr David Boertmann of Aarhus University, who was not involved in the study, said there was already

some local mining of sand for the domestic construction industry in Greenland.

The drawbacks for Greenland, common to other mining projects on the island ranging from uranium to rare earth minerals, include the distance to markets in Europe and North America, he said.

Still, Ms Bendixen said sand was already often transported over long distances, such as to Los Angeles from Vancouver or from Australia to Dubai.

“At the moment it is an inexpensive resource but it will become more expensive,” she said.

The study said that sand and gravel might also be used in future to reinforce beaches and coastlines that are at risk of rising sea levels, caused in part by Greenland’s thaw.

REUTERS

New economic council Azmin defends Cabinet’s performance

PETALING JAYA • Malaysia’s Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali yesterday denied allegations that the country’s new Economic Action Council (EAC) was created because Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was dissatisfied with the Cabinet’s performance.

“This is not true at all... In Pakatan Harapan, we work collectively, even Cabinet decisions are done collectively with all ministers,” said Datuk Seri Azmin.

“This council is made up of experts with their respective specialities, they have good reputation in society and their input is important for us and we will use this to decide on actions to be taken.”

Mr Azmin said Tun Dr Mahathir wanted to create a council that was action-oriented to plan effective strategies for long- and medium-term policies.

“Among the main goals are to address the well-being of the people, the high cost of living, and the increasing cost of goods,” he added.

Dr Mahathir announced on Monday the formation of the 16-member EAC comprising himself, ministers and business leaders to examine and decide on economic and financial affairs and the people’s welfare.

However, Dr Mahathir’s confidant, Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, wrote on his blog yesterday morning that the EAC was convened because the Prime Minister realised that his administration’s machinery, especially the Cabinet, is unable to handle such matters.

“We don’t need to pretend merely to protect the feelings of anyone... The reality is that after eight months governing the country, the Pakatan Harapan administration has not produced any tangible results for the public,” Mr Kadir wrote on his blog.

Dr Mahathir clarified yesterday that the council was set up to allow the government to listen to different views.

“When I was the prime minister the last time, I also set up a similar council, but I didn’t do it immediately,” he said, referring to his first stint as PM from 1981 to 2003. “The Cabinet then had given me full cooperation, but I still set up the council because I wanted to listen to other views on how to manage the economy.”

“Any government that doesn’t want to listen to views from outsiders would go wrong, even if Cabinet is made up of brilliant people,” he said at a press conference yesterday.

THE STAR/ASIAN NEWS NETWORK

PM May still seeking Irish ‘backstop’ changes

She asks MPs for more time to secure legally binding revision to the most contentious parts

LONDON • Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday asked British lawmakers to give her more time for negotiations with the EU on changing a so-called “backstop” policy to prevent the return of a hard border between the British province of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Mrs May said she had told EU leaders what Parliament wants “in order to unite behind a withdrawal agreement: namely, legally binding changes to the backstop”.

“Having secured an agreement with the European Union for further talks, we now need some time to complete that process,” she told Parliament’s main elected House, the Commons.

“When we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote (to Parliament),” Mrs May added.

She promised to make another statement to Parliament on Feb 26, with a vote on what should happen next the following day, if the Brexit deal has still not been finalised.

The United Kingdom is on course to leave the EU on March 29 without a deal unless Mrs May can convince the bloc to amend the divorce deal she agreed to in November and then sell it to sceptical British lawmakers.

Mrs May said she wanted lawmakers from all parties to back the Brexit deal she is aiming to strike, citing the need to pass further legislation to prepare for Britain’s exit from the European bloc.

“The talks are at a crucial stage and we now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes this House requires and deliver Brexit on time,” she said.

“By getting the changes we need to the backstop; by protecting and enhancing workers’ rights and environmental protections, and by enhancing the role of Parliament in the next phase of negotiations, I believe we can reach a deal that this House can support.”

Opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn accused Mrs May of “playing chicken with people’s livelihoods” by running down the clock to get her Brexit deal through Parliament.

“She’s playing for time and playing with people’s jobs, our economic security and the future of our industries,” Mr Corbyn told the House of Commons. “The Prime Minister is merely engaged in the pretence of working across Parliament to find solutions.”

He urged action from ministers reported to be close to resigning to block a no-deal exit. “To stand by and do nothing would be a complete dereliction of duty,” said Mr Corbyn.

British lawmakers overwhelmingly rejected Mrs May’s withdrawal deal last month, with the major sticking point being the Irish backstop.

Critics say the policy could leave Britain subject to EU rules for years or even indefinitely after leaving the bloc. The EU says the backstop is vital to avoiding the return of border controls in Ireland and has refused to reopen the Brexit divorce deal, though Mrs May insists she can get legally binding changes to replace the most contentious parts of the backstop.

EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier said on Monday that the bloc would agree to tweak the political declaration on EU-UK ties after Brexit – which forms part of the package – to reflect a plan for a

closer future relationship that could obviate the need for the contentious backstop.

“It’s clear from our side that we are not going to reopen the withdrawal agreement, but we will continue our discussion in the coming days,” Mr Barnier said.

Diplomats and officials said the UK now faces three main options: a no-deal exit, a last-minute deal or a delay to Brexit.

DPA, BLOOMBERG, REUTERS



The United Kingdom is on course to leave the European Union on March 29 without a deal unless Prime Minister Theresa May can convince the bloc to amend the divorce deal she agreed to in November and then sell it to sceptical British lawmakers. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

British PM hinted she’ll quit this year: Sources

LONDON • British Cabinet ministers believe Mrs Theresa May is preparing to resign as Prime Minister this summer so she can influence who succeeds her, according to The Sun newspaper.

The Sun on Monday quoted sources as saying that at least two senior Cabinet figures have come to that conclusion from hints given to them by Mrs May.

International Trade Secretary Liam Fox is one of the senior ministers that Mrs May has reportedly given the hints to.

“Liam is convinced she’ll go this summer. He says everything the PM has told him suggests that. She’s determined to ensure the right person follows her, and she’ll have no say at all if it gets to the stage of forcing her out,” a senior Tory source told The Sun.

Business Secretary Greg Clark has also reportedly told friends he expects Mrs May to voluntarily stand down this year.

Mrs May’s move will widely be seen as a bid to stop longstanding rival Boris Johnson from getting the top job, the Sun said. The newspaper also said the Prime Minister will likely set out a timetable for a new Tory leadership contest to end at the party’s annual conference in October, reported Reuters.

British lawmakers last month rejected Mrs May’s original Brexit deal that set out the terms by which Britain would leave the European Union. They voted to demand Mrs May seek changes to the treaty.

Britain is due to leave the EU on March 29.

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CRUCIAL STAGE OF TALKS

The talks are at a crucial stage and we now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes this House requires and deliver Brexit on time.



BRITISH PM THERESA MAY, to Parliament’s main elected House, the Commons, yesterday.

US President Donald Trump at a rally in the El Paso County Coliseum on Monday in El Paso, Texas. Mr Trump continues to press for a wall to be built along the southern border but aides say the tentative deal did not contain the US\$5.7 billion (\$\$7.7 billion) the President wants for a border wall. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



US lawmakers reach tentative deal to avoid govt shutdown

It reportedly includes US\$1.37b for new fencing along southern border – far below what Trump has demanded

WASHINGTON • US congressional negotiators have reached a tentative deal to try to avert another partial government shutdown on Saturday, but congressional aides said it did not contain the US\$5.7 billion (\$\$7.7 billion) President Donald Trump wants for a border wall.

“We reached an agreement in principle” on funding border security programmes through Sept 30, Republican Senator Richard Shelby told reporters on Monday.

“Our staff are going to be working feverishly to put all the particulars together,” Mr Shelby said. Neither he nor three other senior lawmakers flanking him provided any details of the tentative pact.

But it was far from clear if the Republican President would embrace the agreement. His December demand for US\$5.7 billion this year to help pay for a wall on the US-Mexico border – rejected by congressional Democrats – triggered a 35-day partial government shutdown that ended last month without him get-

ting wall funding.

A congressional aide, who asked not to be identified, said the outline of the deal included US\$1.37 billion for erecting new fencing along the southern border. That is about the same amount Congress allocated last year and far below what Mr Trump has demanded.

The aide said none of the money would be for a “wall”, which Mr Trump has been touting since he launched his campaign for president in 2016. Democrats say the wall would be costly and ineffective.

Shortly after the deal was reached in the US Capitol, Mr Trump held a rally in the border city of El Paso, Texas, to argue for the wall he says can protect Americans from violent criminals, drugs and a “tremendous onslaught” of migrant caravans.

Mr Trump said he heard about progress in the talks just before he took the stage, but he too did not discuss details.

“Just so you know – we’re building the wall anyway,” he said. “Maybe

progress has been made – maybe not.”

Mr Beto O’Rourke, the former Democratic congressman from Texas considering a 2020 White House run, held a counter-rally just 180m away and accused Mr Trump of stoking “false fear” about immigrants and telling “lies” about Mr O’Rourke’s hometown of El Paso.

But a vocal group of conservatives influential with Mr Trump has urged him to remain steadfast in his demand for the border wall money. In comments about the tentative congressional deal reached on Monday, Fox News commentator Sean Hannity told his viewers: “Any Republican that supports this garbage compromise, you will have to explain.”

Under Monday’s agreement, Democrats gave up on a demand to lower the cap on immigrant detention beds in the interior of the United States. Democrats had complained the Trump administration was increasing detention capacity as a way of speeding up deportations of illegal immigrants.

Mr Trump agreed to reopen the government last month for three weeks to allow congressional negotiators time to find a compromise on government funding for the rest of the fiscal year, which ends on Sept 30, to avert another shutdown.

The handful of lawmakers leading the negotiations met privately for about two hours on Monday. They said they wanted to seal a plan by Monday night to allow time for the legislation to pass the House of Representatives and Senate and get Mr Trump’s signature by Friday, when funding is due to expire for the Department of Homeland Security, the Justice Department and several other federal agencies.

Without a fresh injection of federal funds, an array of federal agencies would have to suspend some activities, ranging from the maintenance of national parks to publication of economic data that is important to financial markets.

REUTERS

WALL ‘WILL BE BUILT’

Just so you know – we’re building the wall anyway. Maybe progress has been made – maybe not.



U.S. PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (left) being greeted by Slovakia's President Andrej Kiska in Bratislava yesterday, during his week-long tour across central Europe. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Pompeo warns US allies over dealings with Huawei

BUDAPEST • US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has cautioned allies against deploying equipment from Chinese telecoms giant Huawei on their soil, saying it would make it more difficult for Washington to “partner alongside them”.

The United States and its Western allies believe Huawei Technologies’ apparatus could be used for espionage, and see its expansion into central Europe as a way to gain a foothold in the European Union.

Washington is concerned in particular about the expansion of Huawei, the world’s biggest maker of telecoms equipment, in Hungary and Poland.

“We want to make sure we identify (to) them the opportunities and the risks of using that equipment,” Mr Pompeo told reporters on Monday during a visit to Budapest.

Hungary is the first stop in a trip by Mr Pompeo to central Europe that will also take in Slovakia and Poland and is part of what US administration officials say is an effort to make up for a lack of American engagement in the region that opened the door to more Chinese and Russian influence.

Huawei denies engaging in intelligence work for any government. It says its technologies serve 70 per cent of Hungarians and that it cooperates with most telecoms providers in Hungary, including state-owned enterprises.

“We have seen this all around the world. It also makes it more difficult for America to be present,” Mr Pompeo told reporters, referring to Huawei equipment.

“If that equipment is co-located where we have important American systems, it makes it more diffi-

cult for us to partner alongside them,” he warned.

Mr Pompeo announced plans for a defence cooperation agreement with Hungary, one of the European governments that is most enthusiastic about Chinese investment. But he said he had discussed “the dangers of allowing China to gain a bridgehead in Hungary” in talks with Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto.

Budapest’s nationalist government hopes to buy mid-range air defence capabilities from the US.

In Poland, the government is considering banning Huawei from participating in the development of 5G capabilities after arresting a Chinese employee of Huawei and a former Polish security official on spying allegations last month. Both men have denied wrongdoing.

Mr Pompeo is also expected to

urge Hungary not to support the TurkStream pipeline, part of the Kremlin’s plans to bypass Ukraine, the main transit route for Russian gas to Europe.

Hungary gets most of its gas from Russia and its main domestic source of electricity is the Paks nuclear power plant where Russia’s Rosatom is involved in a €12.5 billion (\$\$19.2 billion) expansion.

However, Mr Szijarto has brushed off US concerns over Russia and China, saying Budapest was fulfilling its obligations to Western allies as a member of the Nato military alliance.

“When it comes to cooperation with Russia or cooperation with the People’s Republic of China, that does not harm us being reliable as a Nato ally,” he told a joint news conference with his US counterpart.

REUTERS

Trump’s order to prioritise AI lacks funding specifics

WASHINGTON • US President Donald Trump on Monday ordered the US administration to give greater priority to artificial intelligence (AI), a move seen as firing up a battle for leadership with China.

The American AI Initiative executive order calls for the administration to “devote the full resources of the federal government” to help fuel AI innovation.

“Americans have profited tremendously from being the early developers and international leaders in AI,” a White House statement said.

“However, as the pace of AI innovation increases around the world, we cannot sit idly by and presume that our leadership is guaranteed.”

Mr Trump’s order however stops short of specific funding or a detailed strategy for deployment of ar-

tificial intelligence.

The statement made no mention of China but called for “an action plan to protect the advantage of the US in AI and technology critical to US national and economic security interests against strategic competitors and foreign adversaries”.

Still, the move comes amid growing concerns that China will overtake the United States in key areas of AI, helped by a broad national strategy and accelerating investment.

It also comes less than a week after Mr Trump’s State of the Union address, when he said investments in “cutting-edge industries of the future” are “a necessity”.

Mr Darrell West, head of the Brookings Institution’s Centre for Technology Innovation, said the White House move was “timely”

but that it remained uncertain how it would be implemented without clear funding.

“The President sometimes launches initiatives that sound good but have little actual impact,” he said.

“China is investing US\$150 billion (\$\$204 billion) by 2030 with the goal of becoming the pre-eminent AI country in the world. It is important for the US to keep pace because AI will transform many different sectors.”

Senator Marco Rubio called the initiative a “good start”, writing on Twitter: “China is the most comprehensive challenge we have faced from a near-peer adversary in over half a century. Confronting it will require a comprehensive response.”

Senator Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, praised some aspects of the order but criticised its tone.

“The tone of this executive order reflects a laissez-faire approach to AI development that I worry will have the US repeating the mistakes it has made in treating digital technologies as inherently positive forces, with insufficient consideration paid to their misapplication.”

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, BLOOMBERG

Tencent investment in Reddit sparks censorship worry

SAN FRANCISCO • Social news website Reddit confirmed on Monday a new funding round that included a US\$150 million (\$\$204 million) investment by Chinese technology behemoth Tencent, prompting concerns that “the front page of the Internet” might wind up censored.

San Francisco-based Reddit raised US\$300 million at a US\$3 billion valuation, with investors including Andreessen Horowitz, Fidelity, Sequoia and Tencent, the company’s chief executive told CNBC.

The TechCrunch website reported the funding round last week, but that information was unconfirmed until now.

Reddit said it planned to use the money for international expansion and to enhance its digital advertising platform to better compete in a market where Facebook and Google now take in most of the revenue.

“We are the only company at our scale that is still a private company, so we have had a lot of investor attention in the last year,” said Reddit chief executive Steve Huffman.

News of Tencent buying into the popular social news portal, which is banned in China, prompted concerns by some users that the platform could be vulnerable to the kind of online censorship that takes place in the Asian country.

Reddit users protested, some posting pictures known to be banned in China, such as cartoon character Winnie the Pooh.

A Pooh picture, voted to near the top of the Reddit homepage, had the caption: “Since Reddit took a

US\$150 million investment from Chinese censorship company Tencent, please welcome our leader President Xi.”

Images of the storybook bear were reportedly banned online in China after bloggers used them to represent Chinese President Xi Jinping in posts.

Reddit was co-founded by Mr Alexis Ohanian, husband of tennis superstar Serena Williams. Reddit is ranked among the most visited United States websites and has more than 138,000 “communities” for discussions on various topics.

The site boasts that, on average, more than 330 million people use it each month, contending that half of those users range in age from 18 to 24 years.

Reddit is also known for “ask me anything” sessions with well-known people such as Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and former US president Barack Obama.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

\$204m

The amount Tencent is investing in Reddit.

THE STRAITS TIMES

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The Straits Times says

Employers need to take enabling view

Calculations made by this newspaper – marking the first time an estimate of the employment rate for the disabled in Singapore has been arrived at – have revealed an unsavoury fact of economic life. This is that only an estimated five out of every 100 people with disabilities here are employed. At just 4.9 per cent, the rate is one of the lowest among developed societies. By comparison, 18.7 per cent of the disabled in the United States were employed as of 2017. In Britain, Germany and Australia, the figure stood at over 40 per cent as of 2010, while Japan’s hovered at around 20 per cent, according to a report by the International Labour Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

It is not that Singapore’s persons with disabilities (PWDs) are unwilling to work. Like other citizens, they understand the need for employment, which in their case constitutes an acute necessity so that the already onerous physical and psychological burdens of their disability are not multiplied by financial dependence on their families, voluntary organisations or the state. Bizlink Centre, a non-profit organisation that helps people with disabilities find work, notes: “Most people with disabilities yearn to be employed, earn a decent living for themselves, and to have the opportunity to integrate with mainstream society just like able-bodied people.” Indeed, as it adds, the “tangible and intangible benefits of some

form of work outweigh the costs of staying at home”. Entering the workforce in that spirit, employees with disabilities do not register a higher rate of absenteeism than those without disabilities. Bizlink also debunks the notion that the costs of hiring a person with disabilities are substantial. Instead, there is a national fund that helps employers who are keen on offering employment opportunities to them. The Open Door Programme, a scheme that offers grants to companies that hire PWDs, attests to the official desire to help the disabled community through measures that support companies which are progressive enough to give the disabled a chance.

Given these incentives, the disincentives that work against a level playing field in employment for the disabled have to be put down primarily to a conservative, irrational prejudice against this vulnerable section of society. Singapore’s employers, who occupy the same economic trajectory as their counterparts in Europe and North America, would be better off considering how PWDs could benefit them. A recent US study shows that firms which welcome people with disabilities outperform others, driving profitability and shareholder returns. Microsoft and Bank of America, no market laggards, have benefited from the contributions of people whom they did not write off. Singapore’s companies must not lag behind them.

When history leaps from textbooks onto our streets and into our lives

Take a pause. Take stock. And take part in activities to mark the bicentennial. Singaporeans should step up to own their collective journey from the past to the present.

Tan Chuan-Jin

For The Straits Times

Since taking office in Parliament just over a year ago, I’ve been jogging along the Singapore River whenever I can, familiarising myself with the sights.

Then in January this year, I noticed how the lone statue of Sir Stamford Raffles was joined by four others: Sang Nila Utama, Munshi Abdullah, Naraina Pillai and Tan Tock Seng. Not a moment too soon, I thought, given how the Singapore bicentennial is going into full swing. The event commemorates 200 years since Raffles’ arrival in 1819 that kick-started the development of modern Singapore.

The figures of all these pioneers sit just 20 paces from my office window in Parliament House. And they are just 100m shy of an archaeological dig round the corner at Empress Place, where archaeologists have dug up 700-year-old timber planks and pottery shards.

In fact, few may know that our Parliament grounds have also yielded artefacts from China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand, with some going back to the 11th century. A few of these sit in a glass case that all our MPs file past on their way into the Parliament chambers.

All around me is a constant reminder of history made, or in the making. And it can be quite moving, imagining how life unfolded through the centuries, around the places I work each day.

Clearly, even before Raffles and the East India Company capitalised on the potential of our little island, our forebears, along with scores of others in the region, also discovered Singapore as a place of refuge or opportunity, and similarly made their way here, whether 700 years ago or even earlier.

While so many passed through our shores, some stayed and made Singapore home, and yet others moved on. And for every encounter made on this island, surely, we have gained from the traded stories, journeys and shared experiences. I like to think that we have survived and flourished because of our openness to the people who came



in, transited or remained.

As a former student of history, I do often consider: What if no one saw our potential as a landing point, a site for trade and exchange, a home? What if we hadn’t appeared useful, to anyone? What if the economic issues of the time had tripped us up along the way? Or the weight of commerce had shifted and rendered our geopolitical position worthless?

The vagaries of fortune and opportunity could easily have relegated us to the backwater of history, irrelevant and forgotten except as a fascinating footnote.

I believe that at this juncture in our journey as Singaporeans, it is important for us to pause – for recall, reflection and renewal. This is critical for us to continue to move ahead. It informs us for the future.

This is why I’m looking forward to the slew of bicentennial events planned. They may seem to have flooded us in all directions, overwhelming at times, and perhaps indulgent to some, but I welcome them, if only because I’m convinced there is something in the entire package for everyone.

There are exhibitions and tours, talks and seminars, which promise a rich feast for the senses. Some of

us may access our history and legacy better through a light show, some through a documentary or a research tome. The medium matters much less than the opportunity – and I’m hopeful the events and experiences will trigger rich reflection for all. But we must first take note of them and take part in them.

Should we commemorate our subjugation as a British colony? Should we be confident enough to remember this founding as a critical milestone and marker in our history? Did we not set in motion the pace of development that led to independence in 1965?

And in looking back to our past, why stop at 1819? Should we not go further back and give more credit to Sang Nila Utama, or Parameswara? Or should we dig even deeper into the annals of the early South-east Asian histories and study the intrigues and machinations that led to our being?

DEFINING WHERE SINGAPORE ‘BEGAN’

The struggle to define where we “began” is a fascinating exercise in itself.

Curiously, even as we reflect on the legacy of our colonial masters,

the British, and commemorate our liberation to nationhood, we find some United Kingdom leaders talking about how Singapore could be a model for a post-Brexit UK.

Incredible as it may sound to some, they want to learn, if not adopt, some of the systems and values that we, a former colony, have developed and now stand for. While I don’t think we have the model they need, the idea that it has even been considered is rather quaint, particularly given the timing. History is alive around us. Look at how different countries grappled or have made peace with their past, in their present. That we are having this struggle with these dilemmas too is actually a good thing because, at the very least, it shows that we care enough to do so. It helps to establish our identity, decide our place in the world, and shape our future.

I see the bicentennial as an opportunity to recall 1819 as one of the many markers in history. Where SG50 looked intently at our independence, our bicentennial allows us to zoom out and reflect on Singapore in the broader expanse of space and time. Let’s discover more of the other markers of our history and bring to

light more of the unknown.

History was always my favourite subject. However, unlike our children today, I didn’t get to study Singapore history. In lower secondary, we did ancient history. And I didn’t get to do it again until junior college (JC), because I was in the science stream in secondary school. And even in JC, the history I studied was focused on Europe and contemporary affairs, nothing local nor regional.

My sense of Singapore history came mainly from the stories my parents shared about their childhood during World War II, and of the years leading to Independence. My awareness of timelines and circumstance was gradually awakened because there we were, mugging up on the Cold War for the A levels, only to witness the fall of the Berlin Wall a few years later, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

And as I began to serve in the army, the Gulf War broke out and we watched, through CNN, a small country annexed, a country razed. These were real and contemporary reminders to complement my parent’s recollections of the war.

In fact, I should say, all these experiences contributed to my

decision to serve in the army, and later to run for election as a Member of Parliament. As we navigated the politics of our region, I realised that I could be very much a witness and participant in the making of our own history too in Singapore. And we can all make it ours, in all our different ways. But we just have to own it first.

I often recall my dad sharing about his narrow escape from the MacDonald House bombing back in 1965. While that made me a little more attuned to the Konfrontasi than most, it was only when Indonesia controversially named a warship after one of the saboteurs in 2014, that the incident leapt out of the textbooks into life. I learnt that one of the 29 bombs that terrorised Singapore then, had gone off in Sennett estate, where I had lived for many years in a community of good friends and neighbours. I have no idea where that spot is, but I do believe markers should be placed where all the bombings took place, if only to bring this inflexion point in history out of textbooks and closer to home for all of us.

As I have often shared, there is big history, the nation-building stuff, and there is little history, the local stories of people and communities. Both are vital, and vital to be knit together to build our identities and locate us with a sense of place.

This is why we need to discover our markers and milestones.

If we face up to the facts of our legacy, even as we struggle to define what that is, our struggle keeps our identity, our sense of being, very much alive. What I believe we do need, though, is to be confident about our past, with a certainty and pride in how we got to where we are, and a sense of hope of where we are going.

During this bicentennial year, let’s not squander this chance to grapple with the issues of who we are and where we come from. Let’s own our past and our connectedness to the world.

In an age where nationalism can rear its ugly head, we need to be a small nation with a big heart – big enough to remain open to new ideas, new relationships, just so we remain connected to a larger whole.

In an age of globalisation, our shared histories, memories and affections link us and give us relevance and access to so many places and people. And in those links too, we find common ground to move ahead, make progress.

Knowing our place in the world we live in gives us context and perspective. Remembering our links reminds us to never be an island on our own. We cherish all these elements of our legacy, in forming who we are today.

Our Singapore story is one of constant evolution and progress, always linked to the region and beyond. And we can become exceptional, and stay so, by earning a place in peoples’ hearts and writing our own epic as a nation and people – about a Little Red Dot, big and bold enough to hold its own.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Tan Chuan-Jin is the Speaker of Parliament. His fund-raising photography collection and book, Our Place In The World, will be on exhibition at Far East Plaza (Level 2 Concourse) until Feb 28. Proceeds go to 13 charities under the Hope Initiative Alliance to help individuals and families in need.



A memorial for HIV patients being held on the grounds of the Communicable Disease Centre in Moulmein Road in May last year. Health Minister Gan Kim Yong yesterday spoke on the need to destigmatise HIV and called on Singaporeans to be more accepting of people living with HIV.
ST FILE PHOTO

Dealing with HIV data leak a series of judgment calls

In Parliament yesterday, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong went through the sequence of events from 2012 that led to the Ministry of Health's (MOH) disclosure last month of a data leak online involving 14,200 people diagnosed with HIV and 2,400 of their contacts. The leak was made by American Mikhay K. Farrera Brochez. In 2012, Brochez complained that his then live-in partner, Singaporean doctor Ler Teck Siang, who was the head of the National Public Health Unit, had shared information about his HIV status with others. But there was no indication to MOH then that the information came from the HIV Registry. In April 2016, Brochez gave the police and government authorities 75 names and particulars from the registry. This was the first time MOH had evidence that Brochez may have access to confidential HIV-related data. In May 2018, Brochez sent a screenshot of 31 records from the HIV Registry to several government agencies, a subset of the 75 he had revealed earlier. Last month, MOH made a public announcement on the leaked HIV data, after Brochez put the information online. The delay between 2016 and the announcement was not the result of a cover-up but was the outcome of a series of considered decisions, said Mr Gan. In this extract from his speech, he explained the dilemma MOH faced in weighing whether to inform affected individuals of the leak and whether to make a public announcement. He also spoke on the need to destigmatise HIV and called on Singaporeans to be more accepting of people living with HIV.

Let me address questions as to whether MOH should have informed the public earlier. In 2016, MOH had to decide whether to inform the affected persons and whether to make a public announcement about the incident.

These were not straightforward decisions. On the one hand, there is the need to be transparent. On the other hand, we need to consider the impact of an announcement on the affected persons with HIV – would it serve their interest, or harm them instead?

I discussed this with my medical colleagues in MOH. They emphasised the need to pay particular attention to the concerns and needs of HIV patients. A person's HIV status is a deeply emotional and personal matter. Some patients will experience high anxiety and distress from a disclosure or announcement. Some will feel compelled to reveal their HIV status to family members or friends. Relationships can be disrupted; lives can be changed. We had to exercise care and judgment in making our decision, and the well-being of the affected persons weighed heavily in our considerations.

One key factor was that there was then still no evidence that the confidential information had been disseminated to the public. Brochez had sent the information to government authorities. The police search was extensive and all relevant material found had been seized or deleted.

While there could be no guarantee, MOH had good reason to believe that the information had been secured and the risk of future exposure significantly mitigated.

Ultimately, it was a judgment call – to be made based on the information we had, the considerations for and against an announcement, and the assessed risk of future public exposure of the information. MOH judged that on balance, an announcement then would not serve the interests of the affected individuals, when weighed against the inevitable anxiety and distress they would experience.

What happened in 2018

Two years later, in April 2018, Brochez was deported from Singapore after serving his sentence, and we had no reason, on a basis to keep him here.

In May 2018, after his deportation, Brochez sent a screenshot containing 31 records

from the HIV Registry to several government authorities. All 31 records were not new. They were a subset of the 75 which Brochez had earlier revealed to the authorities in 2016. MOH lodged another police report.

We considered again whether to inform the affected individuals and the public. The relevant factors were similar to those in 2016. But there was one difference. This time, we could not retrieve the screenshot of the 31 records in Brochez's possession because he was already out of Singapore.

MOH therefore decided to contact the 31 affected individuals and alert them to the matter. We did not make a public announcement as there was still no specific evidence that Brochez had more information beyond these 31 records.

Furthermore, as on previous occasions, Brochez had shared it only with government authorities, and not to any wider audience. A public announcement would create anxiety and distress not just among the 31 persons but also other HIV patients whose names were in the registry.

In September 2018, Ler was convicted for abetting Brochez to commit cheating, and also for providing false information to the police and MOH. He was sentenced to 24 months' imprisonment. Ler has appealed and this is scheduled to be heard in March 2019.

Why is January 2019 different?

The most recent incident in January 2019 stands on a different footing from the earlier incidents. It showed that Brochez probably still possessed the entire HIV Registry, beyond just the 31 records. He had also put the information online and provided the link to a non-government party.

This new situation meant that the likelihood of the identities of affected persons being made public by Brochez had increased significantly.

MOH therefore decided to make a public announcement on Jan 28, even though we remained deeply concerned about the impact this would have on the affected persons.

We sought to quickly contact each of the affected individuals to inform them of the circumstances and also to offer them assistance prior to the announcement. We worked with the police and other relevant parties to disable access to the information

as quickly as possible.

Basis for decisions and actions

At this point, let me reiterate the basis of our decisions and actions, especially on the issue of disclosure and announcement.

At each juncture – May 2016, May 2018 and January 2019 – MOH had to decide whether to inform the affected persons and make a public announcement.

In making those decisions, MOH had a responsibility to balance the opposing considerations and exercise judgment on what would best serve the interest of the affected persons and the public.

MOH made a judgment call, balancing the various considerations. It is arguable that MOH should have made a different call. But I reject any allegation that MOH sought to cover up the incident. On all three occasions, MOH's primary concern was the well-being of the persons on the HIV Registry.

Today, we still face the same dilemma as we did back in 2016 and 2018. We now know that Brochez retained some data after the police seized all the files they could find in 2016. Quite possibly, he still has more files in his possession.

Should MOH now make known all that Brochez may (or may not) still have in his possession? Do we contact every person whose data may (or may not) be at risk? And in the process inflict more harm on people even though it may ultimately turn out that Brochez in fact does not have the information?

Again, we have to assess and make a judgment call. MOH has decided to continue to manage the situation in a way that reduces the possibility of further exposure. This is consistent with the decision taken in 2016, and again in 2018. It is based on what we believe to be the interest of the potentially affected persons.

Today, we still face the same dilemma as we did back in 2016 and 2018. We now know that Brochez retained some data after the police seized all the files they could find in 2016. Quite possibly, he still has more files in his possession... Again we have to assess and make a judgment call. MOH has decided to continue to manage the situation in a way that reduces the possibility of further exposure. This is consistent with the decision taken in 2016, and again in 2018. It is based on what we believe to be the interest of the potentially affected persons.

INFORMING AFFECTED INDIVIDUALS

MOH has prioritised informing and supporting the affected individuals. We have completed attempts to contact all the affected individuals.

But we are unable to reach all of them, as many had dated contact information, given that the registry went back to 1985. Many of the foreigners were work pass applicants who never worked in Singapore, or who previously worked here but are no longer in Singapore.

Among the affected Singaporeans diagnosed with HIV and still living, we have reached 2,400 out of 3,500. Individuals who worry that they may be affected or who have concerns can contact our hotline at 6325-9220.

We seek their understanding that to maintain confidentiality of the information, we have to verify the identity of the caller. Officers manning our hotline will then provide information on the incident and direct callers to available avenues of support.

Call for destigmatisation of HIV

Several members have called for destigmatisation of HIV, and asked how we can protect people living with HIV from discrimination. Stigmatisation is an issue that all of us are concerned with.

Destigmatisation requires efforts across our society. Let me cite some of the efforts by MOH, together with the government and non-government agencies, advocacy groups and voluntary welfare organisations.

ACCESS AND SUPPORT FOR TREATMENT

Persons living with HIV require lifelong treatment. HIV therefore continues to be a serious infectious disease that MOH closely monitors and actively manages for public health reasons. But clinically, HIV treatment has vastly improved over the years, and early treatment can delay disease progression and improve quality of life.

Over the years, MOH has increased financial support and lowered the financial barriers for HIV treatment, through Medisave and MediFund.

Since 2014, HIV anti-retroviral drugs can be supported under the Medication Assistance Fund. The fund provides means-tested subsidies for lower- and middle-income patients (that is, two-thirds of Singaporean patients), covering up to 75 per cent of the cost of anti-retroviral treatment.

In 2015, with the introduction of MediShield Life, persons living with HIV are now covered by our national health insurance scheme should they be hospitalised.

TESTING AND COUNSELLING

We have also made HIV testing and counselling services more widely available.

For example, anonymous HIV testing is now available at 10 sites across the island. Special outreach efforts have also been made for specific groups. For instance, it is part of standard antenatal testing at our public hospitals.

Support from doctors, medical social workers and healthcare workers is also widely available in the public hospitals. Generally, every HIV patient in public

healthcare institutions is assigned to a medical social worker to provide assistance upon their diagnosis.

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC AND REDUCING STIGMA

It is easy to stigmatise something that we do not understand. MOH has therefore been working with stakeholders to raise awareness of the disease and reduce stigma for the disease.

In 2017, Guidelines On Managing HIV And Aids In The Workplace (were introduced) to help companies create enabling workplace environments for employees with HIV.

More recently, the Tripartite Guidelines On Fair Employment Practices call for all employers to treat employees fairly and based on merit. This includes employees with HIV.

Seeking cooperation

MOH will continue to work with partner organisations to step up efforts in public education, stigma reduction, prevention, testing, treatment and counselling support. But beyond this, how each of us as individuals relate to persons with HIV also matters, a lot.

Here, I would like to appeal to Singaporeans to stand in support of these affected individuals, and our efforts to fight the stigma against persons living with HIV. I would like to urge the public and media not to share illegally obtained information and inform the police or MOH immediately.

The welfare of the affected individuals in this incident would be something of deep concern for us. We would like to encourage those with concerns to contact us on our hotline at 6325-9220.

You may also call the SOS, Tafep and Action for Aids, or approach the healthcare institutions and professionals that have been providing you care and support.

This has been a regrettable incident caused by the irresponsible and deplorable actions of two individuals.

Ler is a Singaporean doctor and former MOH officer who had been entrusted with the care of our patients, but he had betrayed the trust of the ministry and the medical profession.

I am sorry that the irresponsible actions of one of our officers have resulted in such distress to the affected persons. Ler's case is now before the courts, and he will be dealt with according to the law.

The other – Brochez – is an American citizen who had left a trail of lies and deceit, and now perpetrated a reprehensible act that has affected thousands of persons with HIV. He had already spent time behind bars here for his earlier offences. We will spare no effort in bringing him to justice again for his latest crime.

As individuals and part of the larger Singaporean community, the best way for us to respond to this incident is with sensitivity, understanding and support for those affected.

If we can say no to discrimination and reduce the stigma surrounding HIV, we can turn the harm and discord that the perpetrators seek to sow into a more inclusive and supportive environment for persons with HIV.

Transatlantic gulf in mummy expectations of the state

American mums blame themselves for work-family conflict, while their European peers blame the lack of social support.

Caitlyn Collins

A lawyer and I stepped into a windowless conference room in her office building in Washington, and she reflexively closed the door. I had forgotten to restock my tissues and would soon regret that.

By then, I had been interviewing American mothers about their work-family conflict for several weeks. I asked women I had just met what their bosses said to them when they announced a pregnancy, what their parental leave was like, if they could ever work remotely when a child was sick.

This time, I didn't get even 20 minutes into the conversation before the woman I was interviewing dissolved in tears.

She recalled scrambling after her son was born to accomplish two tasks: "knitting back together" from her caesarean operation and assembling a patchwork of enough disability leave, vacation and sick days, and unpaid time off to rest briefly and care for her infant son before returning to work.

The United States is the only country in the industrialised world without federally mandated paid maternity leave. This do-it-yourself approach is often the only option.

"You could have children, but the general expectation was, if you made that choice, you needed to have a plan for someone else to care for them," the lawyer in Washington told me.

Since 2011, I've interviewed 135 middle-class employed mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy and the US to understand their work-family conflict. (I spoke to mothers specifically because in wealthy nations, mothers have historically been the focus of work-family policies and they are still responsible for most housework and childcare. They report greater work-family conflict and use work-family policies more often than men.)

And I had a personal interest: I'd watched my own mother struggle to navigate her work and family obligations – a decade-long juggling act that involved occasionally toting my sister and me to boardroom meetings to nap in sleeping bags when babysitters fell ill or schools closed. Years later, it seemed as though the conflict hadn't eased for many of my peers.

In the US, almost every woman I interviewed had reached the same conclusion: It was her – or her and her partner's – responsibility to

figure out childcare, cobble together a leave of absence (often unpaid), get on a pre-school waiting list, find a babysitter, seek advice from friends and acquaintances, and engineer any number of other highly improvised coping techniques.

In the lawyer's case, this meant, among other things, joining a less prestigious firm that demanded fewer hours and finding the right hands-free breast pump to multitask in her cubicle.

The common thread in every conversation was that the parents had to solve their problem themselves, no matter how piecemeal the solutions.

That all makes perfect (if outrageous) sense: The US has the least generous benefits, the lowest public commitment to caregiving, one of the highest wage gaps between employed men and women, and among the highest maternal and child poverty rates of any Western industrialised nation.

In the course of my interviews, I discovered that American working mothers generally blame themselves for how hard their lives are. They take personal responsibility for problems that European mothers recognise as having external causes.

The lesson here isn't for overwhelmed American parents to look longingly across the Atlantic; it's to emulate the Swedes, Germans and Italians by harbouring the reasonable expectation that the state will help.

All the American mothers I interviewed said they felt enormous guilt and tension between their work and family commitments.

So did the Italians. But Italian women tended to blame the government for their problems: "Social benefits? Zero. Less than zero. Nobody helps me," laughed one woman I met, a single mother working at a hospital in Rome. "Does the government help me? No," she said. "But they should think about helping you a little bit."

In Sweden, working mothers I spoke with wanted full gender equality and expected to seamlessly combine paid work and child rearing. Mothers there also anticipated that the government would support them in these endeavours – and that's exactly what the Swedish state, its work-family policy, and the country's cultural ideals about work and motherhood do.

When Swedish mothers feel stressed, they tend to blame the



country's lofty expectations of what parenting should be.

German mothers ascribed their work-family juggling act, with its emphasis on traditional home life, to outdated cultural ideals.

When the more advantaged American women in my study described the work-family policies their companies offered – flexible

schedules and paid maternity leave being the two mainstays – they used such terms as "being very lucky" or "feeling privileged".

This privatised approach taken by the US government and employers exacerbates inequalities among workers. Some elite employers elect to offer helpful work-family policies, meaning only

certain workers – typically highly educated, salaried employees – receive this support.

The employees most in need of support, however – vulnerable hourly-wage workers – are the ones least likely to enjoy any work-family benefits.

The highest-income earners in the US are 3.5 times as likely to have

The bad news about helicopter parenting: It works

New research shows that hyperinvolved parenting is the route to children's success in today's unequal world.

Pamela Druckerman

I recently met a Texan couple whose son was still in diapers. They were angling to get him into a pre-school that feeds into a private preparatory school with a great record for college admissions.

The couple were ambivalent about doing this. They were from immigrant and working-class backgrounds, and had thrived in public schools. In theory, they believed that all children should have an equal chance to succeed. But I suspected that if they got their son a spot in the pre-school, they would take it. These days, such chances are hard to pass up.

It's a familiar story. Psychologists, sociologists and

journalists have spent more than a decade diagnosing and critiquing the habits of "helicopter parents" and their school obsessions. They insist that hyperparenting backfires – creating a generation of stressed-out kids who can't function alone. Parents themselves alternate between feeling guilty, panicked and ridiculous.

But new research shows that in our unequal era, this kind of parenting is essential. That's the message of the book *Love, Money And Parenting: How Economics Explains The Way We Raise Our Kids*, by economists Matthias Doepke of Northwestern University and Fabrizio Zilibotti of Yale.

It's true that high-octane, hardworking child-rearing has some pointless excesses, and it

doesn't spark joy for parents. But done right, it works for kids, not just in the United States but also in rich countries around the world.

The authors explain that when inequality hit a low in the 1970s, there wasn't that much of a gap between what someone earned with or without a college degree. Strict parenting gave way to an era of "permissive parenting" – giving children lots of freedom with little oversight. Why spend 18 years nagging kids to succeed if the rewards weren't worth it?

In the 1980s, however, inequality increased sharply in Western countries, especially the US, and the gap between white- and blue-collar pay widened. Permissive parenting was replaced by helicopter parenting. Middle- and upper-class parents who had gone to public schools and spent evenings playing kickball in the neighbourhood began elbowing their toddlers into fast-track pre-schools and spending evenings monitoring their homework and chauffeuring them to activities.

American parents eventually added about 12 hours of childcare per week, compared with the 1970s, while Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Canadian and British parents ramped up their childcare too. (In Japan, hyperinvolved mothers are known as "monster parents".)

Not all the changes were rational. When some parents learnt that talking to toddlers helps to develop their young brains, they began monologuing at them constantly.

But for the most part, the new parenting efforts seemed effective. The authors can't prove causality (to do that, you'd have to randomly assign parenting styles to different families). But when they analysed the 2012 Pisa, an academic test of 15-year-olds around the world, along with reports from the teenagers and their parents about how they interact, they found that an "intensive parenting style" correlated with higher scores. This was true even among teenagers whose parents had similar levels of education.

It's not enough just to hover over your kids. If you do it as an "authoritarian" parent – defined as someone who issues directives, expects children to obey and occasionally hits those who don't – you won't get the full benefits.

The most effective parents, according to the authors, are "authoritative". They use reasoning to persuade kids to do things that are good for them. Instead of strict obedience, they emphasise adaptability, problem-solving and independence – skills that will help their offspring in future workplace situations that we can't even imagine yet.

And they seem most successful at helping their kids achieve the holy grail of modern parenting: college and postgraduate degrees, which now have a huge financial payoff.

Using data from a national study that followed thousands of American teenagers for years, the authors found that the offspring of authoritative parents were more

The most effective parents, according to the authors, are "authoritative". They use reasoning to persuade kids to do things that are good for them. Instead of strict obedience, they emphasise adaptability, problem-solving and independence – skills that will help their offspring in future workplace situations that we can't even imagine yet.

likely to graduate from college and graduate school, especially compared with those with authoritarian parents. This was true even when they controlled for the parents' education and income.

The benefits aren't just academic. In a British study, kids raised by authoritative parents reported better health and higher self-esteem. In the American study, they were less likely to use drugs, smoke or abuse alcohol; they started having sex at older ages, and they were more likely to use condoms.

So why wouldn't everyone just become an authoritative parent? Religious people, regardless of their income, are more likely to be

access to paid family leave as those at the bottom of the pay scale.

After three months of interviews with mothers in Sweden, I was heartened to discover that the country in many ways lives up to its image as a place where women come closest to having successful careers and fulfilling family lives.

But consider the national policy focus responsible for that lifestyle: Sweden prizes gender neutrality, universal childcare and a "dual earner-carer" model that features women and men equally sharing breadwinning and child-rearing roles.

Women in Stockholm seemed confused or laughed out loud when I used the term "working mother".

"I don't think that expression exists in Swedish," an urban planner and mother of two told me. "It's not like there's a 'non-working mother'," she said. "I mean, what else would she do?"

But we can't simply import social policies and hope they'll have the same effect in a different context.

For instance, American parents tend to marvel at Germany's comparatively luxurious-sounding three-year parental leave, which was available to new parents, for decades.

So I was taken aback when many working mothers in Germany told me they despised the policy because of the cultural stigma it heaped on their shoulders to not return to work until they absolutely had to.

A teacher who went back to work before the end of the allowable parental leave described people telling her: "You cannot do this. You are selfish, you're a career whore."

"Balance" is a term that came up relentlessly in my conversations with women in the US.

But framing work-family conflict as a problem of imbalance is merely an individualised way to justify a nation of mothers engulfed in stress. It fails to recognise how institutions contribute to this anxiety.

The stress that American parents feel is an urgent political issue, so at least part of the solution must be political as well.

We have a social responsibility to solve work-family conflict. Let's start with paid parental leave and high-quality, affordable childcare as national priorities.

Women – again, on this side of the Atlantic – routinely assume it's their duty to stitch together time off after childbirth. Those fortunate to qualify for parental-leave benefits – even two months at full pay, or six weeks at partial pay – feel real gratitude for such slim provisions.

And in a country where most women (too often the poor and racial-ethnic minorities) receive no paid leave at all, that gratitude makes sense.

But being able to work and raise the next generation of taxpayers and employees should never be deemed a matter of mere "luck". Everyone should feel entitled to more. *NYTIMES*

• Caitlyn Collins is an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St Louis and the author of *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers And Caregiving*, from which this essay is adapted.

authoritarian parents who expect obedience and believe in corporal punishment, the authors found.

Working-class and poor parents might not have the leisure time to hover over their kids or the budget to pay for activities and expensive schools. And they may rightly feel that they need to prepare their children for jobs in which "rule following" matters more than debating skills.

Those who can afford to helicopter are probably making things even more unequal for the next generation. As with the Texan couple, this doesn't always match their political beliefs. In the survey published last year by non-profit group More in Common, respondents who valued self-reliance in children more than obedience, and creativity over good behaviour – staples of both authoritative and permissive parents – were more likely to have voted for Mrs Hillary Clinton in 2016. Those with more authoritarian views on parenting were more likely to have voted for Mr Donald Trump.

Since there's apparently no limit to how much parents are willing to do, the prognosis for parenting doesn't look good. Yet another reason to elect people who'll make America more equal: We grown-ups can finally stop doing homework. *NYTIMES*

• Pamela Druckerman is a contributing opinion writer and the author of *There Are No Grown-Ups: A Midlife Coming-Of-Age Story*.

BIG PICTURE



WEATHER

Windy, with passing showers in the afternoon.
High 33 deg C **Low** 24 deg C
24-hr PSI as of 5pm yesterday: 35 to 53 (Moderate)



PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Art among the ashes

Artist Shane Grammer gave new life to Paradise, California, by painting murals on the walls of homes destroyed by a wildfire.

A former graffiti artist, Mr Grammer painted several murals on destroyed buildings and cars to bring hope to the town.

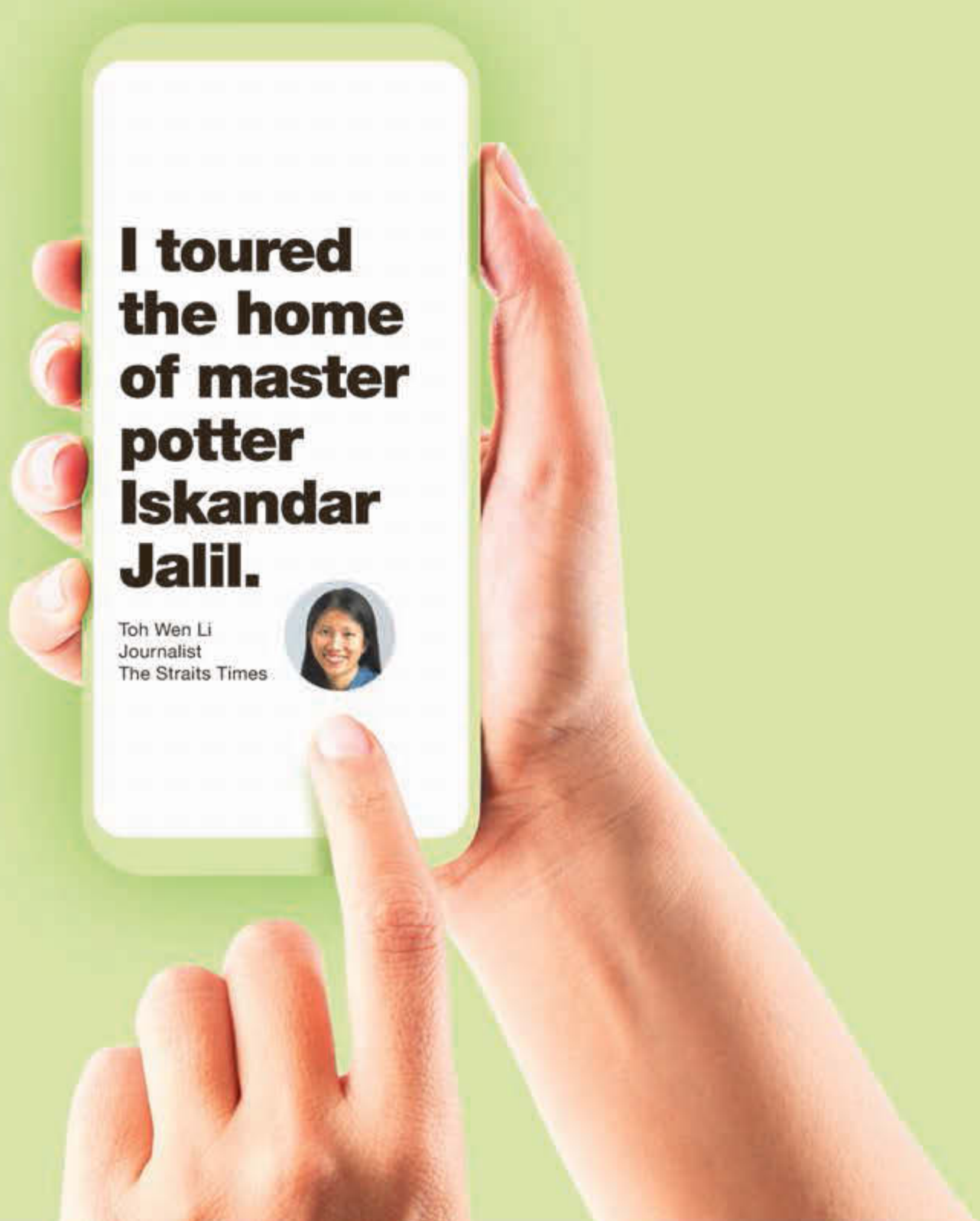
The project is especially personal for Mr Grammer, who grew up near Paradise. A photo of his first mural went viral, and he started receiving requests from survivors for more such creations.

He told CNN: "They would see what I was doing and tell me their harrowing stories of leaving the fire - (it was) just chilling... As an artist, the dream is to move people with your art... and I could see how it moved them."

Three months after the deadly and destructive blaze named Camp Fire, the community is beginning the rebuilding process.

The wildfire killed 86 people and destroyed approximately 19,000 buildings last November.

Mr Grammer plans to return to Paradise to create more murals.



I toured the home of master potter Iskandar Jalil.

Toh Wen Li
Journalist
The Straits Times.



Journalism goes beyond the 24-hour news cycle of current affairs. I have journeyed through the homes of artists and discovered the muse of Singapore's greatest creative minds. As a journalist, you never know what to expect at work. If you're inspired by the spirit of discovery, come take the path less travelled.





Application deadline: Undergraduate Scholarship: **15 February 2019** Mid-Term Scholarship: **15 April 2019**
Scan the QR code to sign up. Alternatively, email scholars@sph.com.sg



B| HOME



LOW AH SAI
LONG-TIME UBI RESIDENT COMMITTED
TO HIS NEIGHBOURHOOD B6

Subject-based banding passes the test

N(A) students from pilot scheme did 'comparably' with peers from O-Level cohort last year

Jolene Ang

He was the only Normal (Technical) student taking Chinese at the Express level in his school. Unity Secondary School's Keane Chua was also taking English at the Normal (Academic) level.

Now 16, Keane, who will soon start a foundation programme at Republic Polytechnic to ready him for the institute's pharmaceutical science course, said that having his language strengths recognised while in secondary school has given him self-belief.

"It was a chance to deepen my knowledge of the subject – for example, at the N(T) Chinese level, the tests consisted of multiple-choice questions but at the Express level, I was doing comprehension, compositions and oral exams. It made me realise that I had the potential if I worked hard and thought positively," he told The Straits Times.

Unity Secondary was one of 12 schools that piloted subject-based banding (SBB), introduced in 2014 to allow N(A) and N(T) students who score at least an A for English, mathematics, science or mother tongue at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) to take the corresponding subject at the Express level. N(T) students who score B or C can take the subject at the N(A) level.

They can also take subjects at a higher level if they do well in them after starting Sec 1.

And students selected for the scheme have raised the bar for themselves.

N(A) students from the pilot scheme "performed comparably" with their peers from the O-Level cohort in last year's exams, said the Ministry of Education (MOE), with 90 per cent achieving passes.

Another 90 per cent of N(T) students who took subjects at the higher N(A) level also achieved passes in those subjects last year.

The scheme has been rolled out to all schools offering the N(A) and N(T) courses, and according to lat-



ST PHOTOS: KHALID BABA

GOOD GROUNDING

I think the SBB subjects are a good way to prepare me for the foundation year.



KRISHA JANELLE GOPU, a Swiss Cottage Secondary N(A) student.

est MOE figures, 60 per cent of N(T) students and 40 per cent of N(A) students in Sec 1 last year took subjects at a higher level.

Teachers ST spoke to highlighted how the scheme plays to students' strengths, and gives them a better chance to qualify for the polytechnics' foundation courses.

Mayflower Secondary School mathematics teacher Chio Kah Leng saw six of his N(A) students promoted to the Express course after taking subjects at a higher level, and showing they could manage them while doing well in their other subjects.

"It is a good initiative by MOE... Students' strengths are identified early," said Mr Chio, 41, who has been teaching for 15 years now.

"Students in N(A) are usually pre-

pared to go into polytechnics or the Institute of Technical Education. But this scheme gives them a chance to get into the Express stream and, from there, some can even make it to junior colleges."

Swiss Cottage Secondary N(A) student Krisha Janelle Gopu, 14, who wants to enrol in Singapore Polytechnic's foundation programme, takes English, mathematics and art under the SBB scheme.

"There's more one-on-one time with the teachers, and more chances to clarify things on the spot. The teachers also give feedback tailored to us," said Krisha.

At Swiss Cottage, smaller classes are set up for SBB students, when the Express ones are full.

For Keane, who was promoted to the N(A) stream from N(T) when he



SELF-BELIEF

It made me realise that I had the potential if I worked hard and thought positively.



KEANE CHUA, a Unity Secondary School student.

was in Sec 2, getting the chance to carry on his education at a polytechnic is a big achievement after he scored just 149 in the PSLE.

He added that getting to do subjects at a higher level gave him the motivation to "not be at the bottom anymore".

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SMU to help students design their purpose-driven education

Sandra Davie
Senior Education
Correspondent

University students are usually asked to declare their majors at the end of the first year. But Singapore Management University (SMU) is looking at getting its students to declare their life missions.

SMU president Lily Kong, who announced the move yesterday, said it is exploring the idea of getting a small number of committed students to define their mission at the end of the first year of studies.

The renowned social, cultural and urban geographer, who took over the helm from Professor Arnoud De Meyer last month, said a student might want to pursue sustainable business and economic practices, or be passionate about addressing the issue of social equality.

The students will be guided by faculty mentors to build a resume with the right mix of courses, research and internships that will enable them to fulfil their mission.

She said SMU already has several inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary programmes to cater to students' career interests. The programmes include law and economics, and smart city management and technology.



SMU president Lily Kong says students can expect more global exposure opportunities.

Professor Kong also touched on another SMU initiative – to ensure all its students head abroad. They can expect more global exposure opportunities with the setting up of global centres, starting with Asean cities such as Bangkok, Manila, Ho Chi Minh City and Jakarta.

Of the 1,775 SMU students who graduated in 2017, 87 per cent had at least one form of global exposure activity during their time at the university, and 55 per cent had two.

The centres will be SMU's "footprint in these cities", helping to seek out opportunities and coordinate activities, including student internships, innovation immersion and community service projects.

They will also be the base for SMU to offer executive education programmes and skills training to corporate firms in the region. The centres will facilitate research link-ups for SMU professors and help SMU connect with its regional alumni.

"Together, the global centres have the potential to contribute to

our international presence and form a network... which SMU can leverage to raise our profile, engage, cooperate with and build relations with global communities," said Prof Kong.

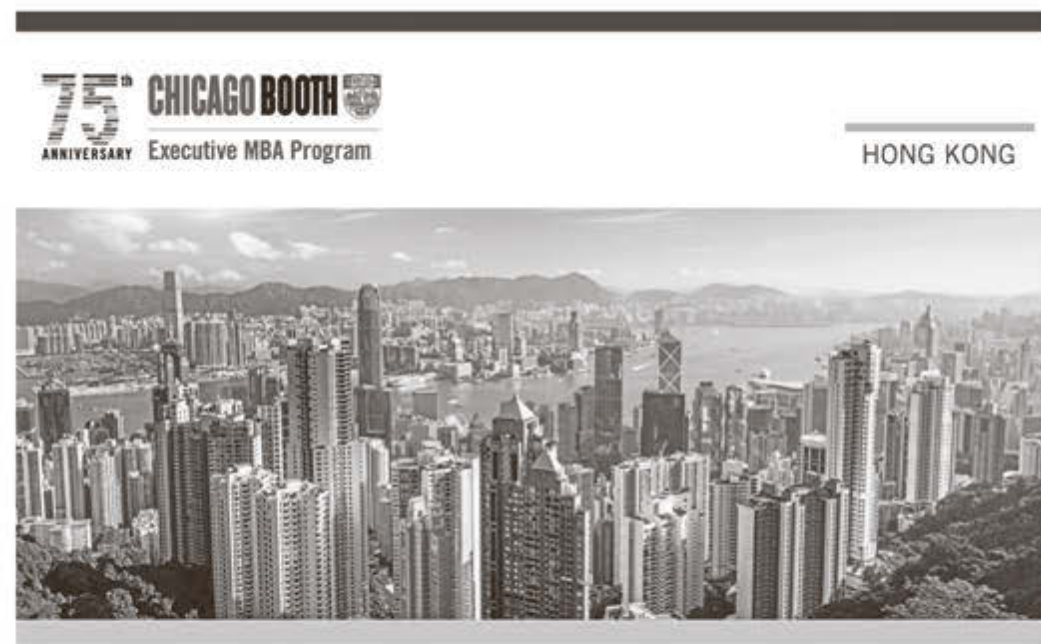
Not forgetting SMU's role in Singapore, she said the university will strengthen and deepen its partnerships with various industries. The partnership models can be "varied and bespoke", she said, with the possibility of even housing some companies on SMU's city campus.

As "Singapore's only university in the city", SMU wants to contribute to thought leadership, and be a place in the city where compelling and relevant ideas are being discussed and debated, she added.

With this in mind SMU will launch city dialogues to engage the broader community in discourse on topics that matter to the "city", such as reducing inequality and re-making the economy.

Prof Kong also announced the appointment of its new provost and dean for the SMU School of Social Sciences (SOSS). Provost-designate Professor Timothy Clark will take office on April 1, while SMU SOSS dean-designate Professor Chandran Kukathas will join the university on July 1.

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14 companies in the running for PMD-sharing licence

Zhaki Abdullah

Fourteen companies have applied to operate personal mobility device (PMD) sharing services.

The companies vying for the Land Transport Authority's (LTA) device-sharing licence – which will allow them to run fleets of devices like e-scooters – include existing players such as local start-ups Neuron Mobility and Telepod.

New contenders include US company Helbiz and Singapore's Omni Sharing, the major shareholder in failed bike-sharing firm oBike.

Applications for the licence closed on Monday.

The licence caps the number of devices a company can run, and requires the firms to take measures to curb indiscriminate parking.

Two existing bike-sharing operators – local firm Anywheel and China-based Mobike – have also applied for the licence.

The LTA said it will adopt a “conservative approach” in setting the fleet size for the operators.

E-scooter sharing services have taken off internationally in the last two years, with Lime and Bird, both from the US, valued at about US\$2 billion (S\$2.7 billion) each.

A Telepod spokesman said the company is “confident” it can get the licence, while Neuron Mobility chief executive Zachary Wang said his company had invested very



Neuron Mobility's e-scooters parked outside the Ascent building in Science Park Drive yesterday. The Singapore-based firm is one of 14 vying for a personal mobility device-sharing licence from the LTA. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

heavily in making its scooters “more regulation friendly”.

But National University of Singapore transport lecturer Lee Der Horng wondered if the small-scale operations required by the LTA would be commercially viable.

He also doubted the safety of PMDs, saying: “How many people are really able to safely use them if

they have no experience?”

A survey by non-profit magazine Consumer Report this month found that more than 1,500 people had been injured in e-scooter accidents in the US since late 2017.

Meanwhile, Moov Mobility and Ywise Circle have applied to operate shared bikes under the LTA's bicycle-sharing sandbox licence.

Mobike, whose bike fleet is capped at 25,000, and Anywheel, which operates 1,000 bikes under the sandbox licence, have also applied to expand their fleet sizes.

The outcome of all applications will be known in the second quarter of this year.

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‘Do more to help those at risk of suicide’

Many laud move to decriminalise attempted suicide but say this is only the first step

Vanessa Liu and Jev Akshay Jeevan

Many have welcomed the move to decriminalise attempted suicide although they still saw it as only the first step in the right direction.

Abetment of attempted suicide continues to be an offence under the Criminal Law Reform Bill proposed in Parliament on Monday.

“Suicide is a multi-faceted and complex issue requiring an equally multi-pronged response; using the

criminal law as a sledge hammer is not a smart approach,” said criminal lawyer Amolat Singh.

He added that it was unlikely the change would lead to more people committing suicide.

Dr Paulin Straughan, sociology professor at Singapore Management University, said: “Given that there is such a strong negative social stigma on mental illness, decriminalising suicide will send the message that mental illness is not a deviant state.”

Non-profit suicide prevention centre Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) was among those which felt that the change would encourage people with suicidal tendencies to seek help as there would be no longer be fear of prosecution.

“Loved ones who are left behind after a suicide death may also cope and reach out to receive emotional support rather than hide it in fear of judgment,” said Ms Wong Lai Chun, senior assistant director of SOS.

Mr Sunil Sudheesan, president of the Association of Criminal Lawyers of Singapore, said that the public needed to be educated on the ways to seek help.

He added: “Many do not know where to go for help and we only read about helplines when someone has been reported to have killed themselves. We should start in the primary schools and keep the message going that help is available.”

Mental health advocate Nawira Baig said that the issue of suicide should be discussed more openly to break the stigma surrounding it and that the problem should be addressed on all platforms – in schools, workplaces and homes.

A joint statement issued by the ministries of Law and Home Affairs yesterday said that on average 0.6 per cent of reported cases of attempted suicide resulted in prosecution each year between 2013 and 2015.

Police will still be able to take action to prevent suicide attempts even after the law has been repealed, as changes will be made to the Police Force Act and the Mental Health Act to allow them to do so.

In 2017, 129 people aged 60 and above took their own lives – the highest number recorded for this age group since the tracking of suicide numbers began in 1991.

SOS figures show there were 361 suicides in total in 2017, 68 fewer than the previous year. But the figure of 429 in 2016 was 20 more than in 2015.

If you have suicidal thoughts or know someone in a similar situation or in emotional distress, call Samaritans of Singapore on 1800-221-4444.

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PUSHED TO THE BRINK

When a person is pushed to the brink of ending his life, the fear of criminal sanctions would be the last thing on his mind. The fact that he is committing a criminal offence is not going to stop him from going over the edge.



CRIMINAL LAWYER AMOLAT SINGH, who has welcomed the decision to repeal the law.

China ‘tries to be friends with all Mid-East states’

Varsity don says Beijing seeks partnerships, not allies, but its role is being questioned

Goh Sui Noi
East Asia Editor

China has been able to steer clear of conflicts in the Middle East, unlike other major powers like the United States and Russia, by seeking partnerships but not allies in the region, a Chinese scholar has said.

China has also been able to make friends with countries that are US allies because of the cheap public goods it can provide through economic, trade, energy and investment cooperation with these nations, Professor Wang Suolao of Peking University said at the annual conference of the Middle East Institute, held at the Goodwood Park Hotel yesterday.

In particular, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first mooted in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, has made a difference in its relations with countries in the Middle East noted Prof Wang.

The BRI, he said, was China's way of providing public goods to the world including the Middle East. The Chinese initiative seeks to build infrastructure such as railways, ports and industrial parks to link China to Asia, Africa and Europe.

Prof Wang said that from 1999 to 2012 – a period of 13 years – China established partnerships with five countries, including Egypt, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). But in five short years, after the start of the BRI, China formed partnerships with nine more countries in the region, including Qatar, Jordan, Israel, Iraq and Iran.

It also established comprehensive partnerships with five countries, four of which are American allies: Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The fifth is Iran.

It is China's policy to establish partnerships but not allies “so that American allies at the same time can also be China's partners”, said Prof Wang. It also means that countries in conflict with each other, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, can both be China's partners.

Dr Jon Alterman of the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies said that governments in the Middle East are enthused by China's BRI in part because of the perception that the US is beginning to turn away from the region. There are other considerations as well.

“Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to deepen its ties with China not only because China is such an important global oil consumer but also to ensure that China doesn't side with Iran too much,” he said.

As for Iran, it seeks to build ties with China as a counterweight to what it regards as US domination, while Egypt sees China as a source of capital free of political judgment.

“A lot of governments see a relationship with China as a way of providing the material benefits that they get from the US ties, (but) with less baggage,” said Dr Alterman.

But he noted that China establishes its ties in such a way that it is far more important to the country it is dealing with than vice versa, so that it is in the driver's seat. He cited the example of Iran's relation-



Speakers at the session on the geopolitical context of China's engagement with the Middle East at the annual conference of the Middle East Institute yesterday were (from left) Professor Wang Suolao of Peking University, Mr Ehud Yaari of the Washington Institute and Dr Jon Alterman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. PHOTO: CMG

ship with China, in which China represents 33 per cent of Iran's total trade while Iran represents less than 1 per cent of China's trade.

“China is clearly in the driver's seat because Iran is so reliant on China but China is not similarly reliant on Iran,” he said.

He added that there are many as yet unanswered questions about Beijing's role in the region and the world and that there is already growing scepticism in Africa about China after more than a decade of large-scale Chinese investment there.

Prof Wang said China does not want to create trouble in the Middle East, and wants to bring peace and economic benefits to the region, adding that it should be given time to do better.

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NEA cuts caterer's hygiene grade to ‘C’

Local catering company Team Catering, which provided buffet food to Raffles Institution (RI) students for a graduation event last October, has had its food hygiene grade downgraded to “C”.

In a notice on its website on Monday, the National Environment Agency (NEA) said it adjusted the caterer's food hygiene grade after investigations into the Oct 19 incident. Its previous grade was “B”.

A total of 179 students fell ill after eating the food prepared at the caterer's premises at Shimei East Kitchen in Bedok North Street 5.

The Year 6 students suffered gastroenteritis symptoms just days before many of them were due to sit their A-level examinations, an earlier report on the incident said.

Some students said they had diarrhoea, vomiting and abdominal pain within hours of eating the food. One student had to be hospitalised.

RI principal Frederick Yeo told The Straits Times then that almost all the students recovered after a few days.

The grade will be reviewed in 12 months, NEA said, adding that it will keep the caterer's premises under surveillance in the meantime.

According to its website, Team Catering is a halal-certified catering company offering services for weddings, birthdays, housewarming parties and corporate events. It also provides bento boxes and live stations.

NEA said the public may view the revised hygiene grade of the caterer after 12 months on its website.

The agency gives retail food establishments grades between “A” and “D” based on their overall hygiene, cleanliness and the housekeeping standards of the premises. A “C” grade has a score of between 50 per cent and 69 per cent.

The Straits Times has contacted Team Catering for more details.

Ng Huiwen

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Parliament in numbers

900 The number of households granted a third HDB loan out of 4,500 appeals last year.



1,100 to 500 The decrease in the number of complaints about joss paper and incense burning from 2015 to last year.



\$3,076,000 The amount of owed salaries that the Employment Claims Tribunal ordered companies to pay last year.

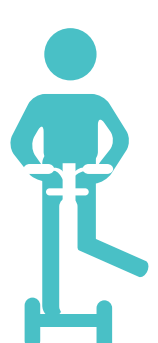
4,000 The number of Islamic religious teachers who have been accredited under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme so far, up from around 3,000 in 2017.



2,500 The average number of students with special educational needs enrolled in institutes of higher learning over the past three years.



616 The number of people caught riding personal mobility devices on roads last year. Of these, an estimated 18 per cent were caught for riding on minor roads in private landed estates.



33% The increase in the pigeon population in Basel, Switzerland, in 1988, despite 24 years of intensive culling.



2,400 The number of people the Health Ministry has contacted, out of the 3,500 living Singaporeans and permanent residents affected by the HIV data leak.



STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

3 strategies for new agency to strengthen food security

Diversify sources, grow agri-food sector, help S'pore firms overseas

Cheryl Teh

Singapore's new food regulator will ensure the country's food security by further developing three national strategies to obtain food, said Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli.

He set out the Singapore Food Agency's (SFA) priorities in Parliament yesterday during the debate on a Bill that will pave the way for its formation on April 1 to oversee food safety and security.

Stressing that food security is fundamental to Singapore's national security, Mr Masagos said Singapore must not be over-reliant on any single food source.

He recounted how Malaysia announced last December that it was considering limiting or stopping egg exports, and restricting exports of certain types of seafood.

It will not be the last time that Singapore faces possible disruption to its food imports, he noted.

"With the formation of SFA, we will continue to strengthen Singapore's food security and reduce our vulnerability to external volatility and price hikes," he said. "SFA will also continue to partner other government agencies to ensure basic food items remain affordable."

First, the SFA will build on existing work by the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) to diversify import sources, Mr Masagos said. These sources have been expanded from 140 countries in 2004 to around 180 countries today.

"We take for granted apples from Poland, bananas from Ecuador, and mandarin oranges from China in our supermarkets. These are, in fact, the fruits of a deliberate strategy to diversify our food sources," he said.

He noted that food imports will remain the Republic's biggest "food basket" for the foreseeable future.

The SFA will also intensify efforts to grow the agri-food sector here, which is Singapore's second food basket, he added.

This includes educating farmers of the future at local institutes of higher learning, and possibly having indoor vertical farms and deep-sea fish farming in future.

As part of growing Singapore's third food basket, he said, the SFA



Stressing that food security is fundamental to Singapore's national security, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli said Singapore must not be over-reliant on any single food source. He recounted how Malaysia announced last December that it was considering limiting or stopping egg exports, and restricting exports of certain types of seafood.

ST FILE PHOTO

will continue to help Singapore companies based overseas to access new and bigger markets, to bring down costs through economies of scale and reduce the price of exports to the Republic.

The SFA will take over the AVA's responsibilities with regard to food safety and security.

In addition, the National Environment Agency's role of regulating food hygiene at the retail level and the analysis of food samples under the Health Sciences Authority will come under the new agency.

This consolidation will allow SFA

to react more quickly to food safety incidents and deepen food safety expertise in Singapore, among other things, Mr Masagos said.

Twelve MPs raised questions and spoke on issues that included food safety, food labelling and production during the debate on the Singapore Food Agency Bill, which was passed yesterday.

Mr Ong Teng Koon (Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC) asked if Singapore would be able to import foods of similar quality and safety if its food supply is curtailed by its neighbours.

Workers' Party Non-Constituency MP Daniel Goh asked if the SFA would be able to mitigate against rising food prices that fuel increases in cost of living and address household food insecurity.

Replying, Mr Masagos said securing Singapore's food supply is also the primary way to mitigate against price volatility and spikes. "This is a focus of SFA, which will continue to contribute to whole-of-government efforts to provide affordable food, accessible to all Singaporeans."

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Dealing with animal-related issues better

As the issues underlying the co-existence of animals and humans become increasingly complex, Singapore will be in a better position to manage them when animal welfare and management are put under the charge of the National Parks Board (NParks), said Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of National Development, Ms Sun Xueling, yesterday.

The transfer of some of the tasks of the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) to NParks holds another benefit, she added.

Animal-borne diseases will be detected more quickly because of their combined expertise: NParks has know-how in ecology and animal population studies, while AVA is knowledgeable in veterinary science and diagnostic testing.

Ms Sun highlighted these advantages in Parliament during the debate on the NParks (Amendment) Bill, which was later passed.

It means NParks will, from April 1, be in charge of all matters on non-food plants and animals as AVA ceases to exist, following the transfer of its other tasks to a new statutory board, the Singapore Food Agency.

Said Ms Sun of the change: "Combining NParks' expertise in wildlife conservation and horticultural science, and AVA's in animal and plant health, and animal management, will ensure efforts to conserve Singapore's natural heritage are holistic and science-based."

Also, animal lovers and animal welfare groups will be able to work with NParks' strong base of 45,000 volunteers as well as stakeholders to come up with new and innovative solutions for animal issues, said Ms Sun, who is also Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Home Affairs Ministry.

Following the change, NParks will set up the Animal and Veterinary Service as the main touchpoint for animal matters, whether they occur in parks, nature reserves or other parts of Singapore.

Apart from being first-responders for animal-related issues, it will be the agency for people to call to remove wildlife, such as snakes and wild boars.

Five MPs spoke during the debate, with Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) having the House in stitches over her account of her constituents' dilemma in dealing with snakes and rats.

Some also wondered how NParks will tackle the potential conflicts between animals and people.

Ms Sun said a holistic suite of measures will be taken, including removing food sources for animals.

Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC), who is also chief executive of Animal Concerns Research and Education Society, an animal protection charity, dwelt on the culling of animals deemed a nuisance.

Referring to the experience of some overseas cities, he said "culling has clearly not worked".

Citing Basel in Switzerland, he said 100,000 pigeons were killed over 24 years. But instead of going down, the pigeon population in 1988 rose to nearer 30,000, one-third more than the 20,000 in 1963.

It adopted different measures, such as removing pigeon eggs and controlling the availability of food, and the population plunged to 10,000 pigeons.

He urged the Government to look at the problem "not just from an animal welfare perspective but also from an effectiveness perspective".

Cheryl Teh

Planned funeral home must take steps to lower impact

Linette Lai

The operator of a planned funeral parlour in Bukit Batok will have to put in place measures to minimise the impact of its activities on residents, said Environment and Water Resources Minister Masagos Zulkifli in Parliament yesterday.

These could include barriers to keep funeral activities discreet and

eco-friendly burners to minimise smoke emissions.

"Rituals and funeral processions will be confined within the site as far as possible to minimise disturbance," he added.

Mr Masagos was replying to Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok), who had also asked how the site in Bukit Batok Street 23 was selected.

The funeral parlour is among four such facilities that will be opened in

the next decade to meet growing demand as the population ages.

Mr Masagos said the site next to Bukit Batok Industrial Park A was chosen as there was a "dearth of facilities in the western region".

The closest such facility was in Choa Chu Kang, he said, but it was difficult to reach without a car.

He also said the National Environment Agency would work with the funeral parlour operator and

other agencies to reduce the impact of hearses when these are in the area.

"This can include ensuring accessibility via different routes and avoiding roads within residential estates as far as possible," he added.

The sites will be progressively launched over the next decade or so, and are located in various parts of Singapore to provide a better distribution of funeral parlour services for

bereaved families and their visitors.

The other three funeral parlour sites to be opened in the next decade are in Ang Mo Kio, Woodlands and Mandai.

By 2040, the annual number of resident deaths is projected to double to around 40,000.

Mr Masagos said that as a general rule, sites for funeral parlours were selected after considering factors such as development plans for the

area, the capacity of the road network to support anticipated traffic, and accessibility to public transport.

"As a small and densely populated city-state, there will always be competing demands for space to meet Singapore's various development needs," he said.

"Through careful planning and by taking mitigation measures, the Government will make the best effort to minimise potential disamenities arising from these developments," he added.

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Faulty gear likely cause of Jan 26 blackout

Power was cut to stop substation fire from damaging other equipment: Koh Poh Koon

Seow Bei Yi
Business Correspondent

A faulty voltage transformer at a substation was the likely cause of a 1½-hour power outage last month that affected around 27,000 people.

The faulty transformer started a fire in a substation in Bright Hill, and preliminary investigations by the Energy Market Authority (EMA) suggest this led to the Jan 26 outage, said Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Koh Poh Koon.

Once the fire was detected, protective devices were automatically activated to isolate the fault so that other equipment would not be damaged, Dr Koh said yesterday.

This resulted in the power being cut, he told Workers' Party Non-Constituency MP Leon Perera, who had asked about the extent and cause of the incident.

The power failure hit consumers in Ang Mo Kio, Bishan, Sin Ming, Toa Payoh and Thomson, where residents reported a cut in their home electricity supply. Lifts and traffic lights stopped working.

This incident came after another major outage last September that affected more than 146,000 residents

in multiple parts of Singapore, ranging from Boon Lay to Aljunied.

On whether there was a rising trend of such power failures, Dr Koh said the Jan 26 incident was the first power failure in five years involving a faulty voltage transformer.

"Other incidents may have happened in the recent past, but this does not necessarily indicate a systemic issue because they pertain to either different parts of the system, or could have been just due to human error," he added.

"We would be worried about a trend if the same component, or the same system within the electrical grid across different substations, failed repeatedly."

Dr Koh also said he would not draw any premature conclusions until investigations are complete.

On Jan 26, national grid operator SP Power Grid restored the power supply to 80 per cent of affected consumers in 30 minutes, Dr Koh said.

The remaining consumers had their electricity supply restored in 90 minutes.

Stressing that Singapore's power system remains among the most reliable in the world, he said that over the past six years, Singapore's average annual disruption per con-



Shunfu Mart Food Centre was among the areas hit by the Jan 26 blackout. It was the first power failure in five years involving a faulty voltage transformer, said Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Koh Poh Koon. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ST READER

sumer ranged from 12 seconds to 4.2 minutes. This includes the most recent incident.

Major cities such as Osaka, New York, Hong Kong and London experienced an average disruption per consumer of between five minutes and 21 minutes in the financial year of 2017, he noted.

EMA will thoroughly investigate each incident and take regulatory

action if necessary, said Dr Koh.

He added that SP Power Grid has set up an internal investigation committee to investigate the incident, and brought in experts from the original equipment manufacturer to review and advise if the failure was due to design, manufacturing or material defects.

An independent expert, Chubu Electric from Japan, has been asked

to review the manufacturer's findings and recommendations.

SP Power Grid has since increased the frequency of monitoring for the specific equipment that failed, and will prioritise replacements of that particular component in future rounds of substation maintenance, Dr Koh said.

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NOT A RISING TREND

Other incidents may have happened in the recent past, but this does not necessarily indicate a systemic issue because they pertain to either different parts of the system, or could have been just due to human error. We would be worried about a trend if the same component, or the same system within the electrical grid across different substations, failed repeatedly.



SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY KOH POH KOON, on recent power failures.

Govt held to high standards on data protection: Iswaran

Hariz Baharudin

The Government is held to the same, if not higher, standard of responsibility as the private sector in terms of personal data protection, said Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran yesterday.

He said this to Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim (Aljunied

GRC), who had asked if public agencies could be included in the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) in the light of recent public data breaches like the one affecting SingHealth.

Mr Iswaran pointed to the Public Sector (Governance) Act (PSGA), which he said has safeguards for personal data in the public sector, including criminalising the misuse

of data by public servants.

These data protection standards are aligned with the PDPA, he said, adding that personal information collected by the public sector is also protected by other laws such as the Official Secrets Act, the Income Tax Act and the Statistics Act.

Said Mr Iswaran: "Collectively, these laws impose a high standard of responsibility on all public agen-

cies, with additional requirements for the protection of sensitive or confidential data."

Mandatory audits are conducted regularly to ensure these agencies comply with data protection standards, he added.

Mr Iswaran, who is also the Minister-in-charge of Cyber Security, said in response to Ms Lim that there will be recourse for people whose data is compromised, and that all complaints will be investigated.

Singapore's privacy watchdog, the Personal Data Protection Commission, does receive complaints about the public sector, he said. It then refers the matter to relevant government agencies.

He also listed other avenues that

people can turn to should they feel their data has been compromised.

These include the Government Technology Agency, the ministry overseeing the relevant public agency, as well as the police, if people feel a crime has been committed.

The PSGA allows personal data to be managed as a common resource within the different agencies in the public sector for better policymaking, Mr Iswaran said.

It also allows for more responsive public services by making the sharing of information across agencies possible.

In contrast, private organisations are expected to be individually responsible for the personal data in

their possession. There is also no expectation of a similar integrated delivery of services across different commercial organisations.

These differences mean that there has to be different approaches to the protection of personal data in both the public and private sectors, Mr Iswaran said.

He added that the Government will continue to update the laws that protect personal information here.

"We will regularly review the PDPA, the PSGA and other legislation to ensure that they remain relevant and effective in safeguarding personal data in both the public and private sectors," he said.

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616 caught riding PMDs on the road in 2018

Zhaki Abdullah

An average of 51 people a month were caught for illegally riding personal mobility devices (PMDs) on the roads last year, up from an average of 40 for the first 11 months of 2017.

Of the 616 PMD users caught last year, 18 per cent – or about 110 cases – were caught on minor roads in private landed estates, said Senior Minister of State for Transport Lam Pin Min in Parliament yesterday, in reply to Workers' Party Non-Constituency MP Dennis Tan.

Riding PMDs on the road is an of-

fence, with first-time offenders facing a fine of \$300 for riding on minor roads and \$500 on major roads.

Dr Lam, who is also Senior Minister of State for Health, said the Land Transport Authority (LTA) focuses enforcement efforts on roads with heavy traffic, as well as areas with significant public feedback.

He added that in cases where pedestrians are hit by PMD riders, both parties can go for mediation at the Singapore Mediation Centre or the Law Society of Singapore.

However, neither organisation has received any mediation cases involving PMD accidents, he said in

reply to Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC).

"If mediation fails, either because one party refuses to attend or the parties are unable to come to a resolution, the claimant can choose to file a civil suit in the State Courts," said Dr Lam.

Those who cannot afford legal representation can approach the Law Society or the Legal Aid Bureau, he added.

Criminal prosecution is also a possibility, he said, adding that those who have suffered significant injuries in an accident should file a police report as soon as possible to allow the police to

launch an investigation.

"And should the AGC assess that an offence has been committed, then the court will consider whether to order the offender to compensate the victim," he said, referring to the Attorney-General's Chambers.

Ms Lee also asked if PMD riders should be made to buy insurance.

Dr Lam replied that while both the LTA and the Active Mobility Advisory Panel encourage riders to buy third-party liability insurance, this was not made mandatory, as the panel – which recommends guidelines on the safe use of bicycles and PMDs on public paths – felt it would be onerous on occasional users.

Rather, measures such as reducing the speed limit on footpaths to 10kmh were suggested, and later implemented, to prevent the likelihood of accidents, he added.

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Riding personal mobility devices (PMDs) on the road is an offence, with first-time offenders facing a fine of \$300 for riding on minor roads and \$500 on major roads. Of the 616 PMD users caught riding on the road last year, 18 per cent – or about 110 cases – were caught on minor roads in private landed estates.
ST FILE PHOTO

ParliamentBriefs

900 families given third HDB loan

The Housing Board granted 900 families a third housing loan last year – a fifth of the 4,500 appeals it received.

Mr Ong Teng Koon (Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC) wanted to know why the HDB did not give out more loans. Currently, eligible Singapore households can get up to two housing loans at concessionary interest rates.

National Development Minister Lawrence Wong said there were two broad camps of people whose appeals for a third loan were rejected – those eligible for bank loans, and those who would be unable to service the loan, to begin with.

"Rather than have them overstretch, it is more prudent for them to build up their savings, steady their income, and apply for the HDB loan at a subsequent stage," he said.

4,000 Islamic teachers accredited

The number of Islamic religious teachers accredited under a national scheme has risen to more than 4,000, up from 3,000 in 2017.

Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli gave the updated figure as he stressed that those who fail to meet the high standards of the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) would be struck off its register.

The ARS, which became compulsory from 2017, requires religious teachers to abide by an ethical code, which includes not encouraging extremism or violence.

Nominated MP Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad had asked about safeguards to ensure religious teachers here do not hold radical views.

Bicentennial to mark women's role

The Singapore Bicentennial Office will work with more than 270 community partners to highlight groups of women who have made important contributions to Singapore.

One partner is the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, which will help develop a heritage trail linking iconic infrastructure and monuments built by samsui women in the 19th and 20th centuries, said Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah yesterday.

Nominated MP Lim Sun Sun had asked if the bicentennial celebrations would make a greater effort to reflect women's contributions.

Ms Indranee said the Bicentennial Office has started sharing social media stories of prominent women, including that of tradeswoman and philanthropist Hajjah Fatimah, who came to Singapore in the 1800s and built houses for the poor.

MerdekaGeneration

‘Son of Ubi’ firmly rooted in the area

While the pioneer leaders were the architects of Singapore, everyday heroes helped build society here. This is another story of our Merdeka Generation, those born in the 1950s who lived and persevered through a tumultuous period.

Cara Wong

From growing up on a poultry farm to seeing high-rise Housing Board blocks being built, Mr Low Ah Sai knows how much the area around Kampung Ubi has changed over the past 50 years.

The 64-year-old easily rattles off the names of the area’s former streets, now long gone, and knows what used to be on the site where HDB blocks now stand.

“My roots have grown deep into the soil here, I can’t run away,” he said with a laugh. After all, he was born in Ubi and has lived in the area all his life.

The youngest of four children, Mr Low began life on a Kampung Ubi farm located near where Geylang Police Station is now.

He grew up helping his parents on their 2ha farm, rearing chickens,



ducks and pigs, and growing vegetables. His life revolved so much around the farm that his mother did not want him to apply for a passport, he said. “She told me, why go through all that trouble? It’s not like you’re going to go anywhere.”

He recalled how he had to sneak out of the house to get his passport

done when he was in his 20s.

Things changed in the mid-1970s, when the area was redeveloped and the family had to give up the farm, moving into a nearby HDB flat.

With little education – he had dropped out of school after Primary 6 – Mr Low became a lorry driver, and then a bus conductor.

He married his elder sister’s colleague, and the couple moved into another HDB flat in the area, and had three children.

Life changed when he was just 34 years old. One night in 1988, he crashed into some shophouses while driving a bus. The next day, his badly injured left arm had to be amputated.

“It was only when I woke up that I realised my arm was gone,” he said. “When I returned home, I would secretly cry at night.”

Mr Low’s youngest child, a son, was then less than a year old.

After the accident, he and his wife swapped roles – she became the breadwinner, working in different factories, while he became a house husband, doing the chores and caring for the children.

“We had to make it work with just \$450 a month for all five of us. But I’m thankful my wife was hardworking, she didn’t complain.”

The family made do with the bare minimum, said Mr Low. “But my children were very good; even as their friends were eating fast food like KFC, they knew we could not afford it and they didn’t ask.”

To supplement the family income, he took on odd jobs such as working as a helper for an ice-cream seller.

His wife retired in the late 2000s, after his four grandchildren were born. His two older daughters, now aged 36 and 34, are married. Only his son, who is 32, still lives with the couple in their Eunos Crescent flat.

With his children grown up, Mr Low found himself with more spare time, which he spends meeting friends and on his hobby of collecting items such as phone cards.

He has also found joy in volunteering. This started in 2010, when an activity centre for the elderly, Shan You Wellness Community, opened just down the road from his home. Curious, Mr Low walked over to check it out on its opening day.

“They said they were giving out free food to the elderly, so I sneaked



Above: Mr Low Ah Sai volunteers at an activity centre for the elderly and has no intention of stopping any time soon. Left: Mr Low in the early 1980s, when Changi Airport had just opened. PHOTOS: KELVIN CHNG, COURTESY OF LOW AH SAI

MERDEKA GENERATION

Know a Singaporean born in the 1950s who has lived a storied life? E-mail us at rahimah@sph.com.sg

days, and half day on Saturdays.

Ms Jennifer Lee, Shan You’s communications manager, said Mr Low is often the first person to be at the centre and the last one to leave.

“He told me that helping people is very easy, whether it’s with one hand or two hands. As long as you have the heart to do it, it’s all fine,” said Ms Lee, 44.

Mr Low said: “My friends asked if there was any money involved in it, and they didn’t believe me when I said there wasn’t.”

“They said only a silly man would do such things for free, but I think it’s important to do such things for the community.”

Mr Low, who now walks instead of cycles to the centre, intends to keep helping out there.

“I just live life day by day and be happy. It’s good to have things to do, time passes very fast.

“I’ll do this for as long as I can.”

carawong@sph.com.sg

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Shaffiq Alkhatib

A former teacher told his girlfriend that he needed money as capital for “investments” and duped her into handing over cash totalling more than \$178,000.

Gary Won Han Kiat, 35, who taught from 2011 to 2013, was sentenced to two years and a month in jail yesterday. Won, who is jobless, pleaded guilty to 18 counts of cheating. He committed the offences between 2015 and 2017. Thirty-eight other charges for similar offences were taken into consideration during sentencing.

The court heard that Won’s relationship with receptionist Leong Shi Min, 26, lasted two years. They first met via messaging app WeChat in 2015. Won lied to Ms Leong, claiming to be a contractor, and on Oct 23 that year, he asked her for \$4,000 on the pretext that he needed the funds as capital for work investments. She

believed him and transferred the money to his bank account.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Jessie Lim said Won had no intention of using the money as work-related investments. Instead, he purchased \$3,950 worth of chips at the Resorts World Sentosa casino the next day and gambled away the money.

He continued to ask her for more money after this, the court heard.

DPP Lim said: “In all instances, the accused deceived the complainant... by stating that he required the sums for his work investments when in reality they were used to fund his gambling habit.

“Around Nov 19, 2015, having dipped into her personal savings to deliver moneys to the accused, the complainant then resorted to asking her mother for help when the accused asked for more (cash).”

Ms Leong’s mother agreed to help and even cashed out her personal insurance policy so that she could pass the money to her daughter. Ms

Leong would then hand over the funds to Won.

Court documents did not show how his offences came to light, but the couple’s relationship ended around May 2017. She alerted the police on Nov 2 that year, saying Won had cheated her of cash on numerous occasions.

DPP Lim said Won had made restitution of more than \$12,000. She urged District Judge John Ng to sentence Won to two years and three months in jail. She said the case involved a large sum of money and Won had abused Ms Leong’s trust.

Defence lawyer Ashwin Ganapathy pleaded for a jail sentence of a year and eight months, saying Won had pleaded guilty to his offences at an early opportunity. Won was offered bail of \$20,000. He has to surrender himself at the State Courts next Monday to begin serving his sentence.

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Art Stage Singapore in process of being wound up

Main visual arts fair here placed under provisional liquidation on Jan 31

Akshita Nanda and Olivia Ho

Art Stage Singapore, the company behind what was once the main visual arts fair in the country, was placed under provisional liquidation on Jan 31, according to a press statement from the restructuring consultancy company appointed to wind it up.

This marks the end for Art Stage Singapore, considered the country's most influential art fair since 2011. This year's event was cancelled abruptly on Jan 16, eight days before its preview opening at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

A press statement issued by Acres Advisory yesterday announced the provisional liquidation and said that Mr Tee Wey Lih has been appointed the provisional liquidator.

He is arranging to recover the company's assets and records.

A creditors' meeting has been scheduled for Feb 28 and the notice of meeting will be issued to the creditors shortly, according to the statement.

In an e-mail to The Straits Times, Acres Advisory said the liquidation process was initiated by the directors of Art Stage Singapore, and estimated that it will take between 12 and 18 months to complete, assuming no complexities develop.

Asked if all the creditors would be getting their money back, a spokesman for Acres replied: "We are still evaluating the situation and in the midst of recovering the company's assets. We would be in a better position to advise the creditors on the recovery prospect in due course."

Art Stage Singapore's fair director is company president Lorenzo Rudolf, and his wife Maria Elena is vice-president.

The fair was backed by the National Arts Council, Economic Development Board and Singapore Tourism Board.

Mr Rudolf, a Swiss national, transformed Swiss art fair Art Basel from a quiet trade event into a glamorous, internationally esteemed art show in the 1990s. This led to him being invited by the Singapore authorities to set up a similar fair here.

Art Stage Singapore debuted in 2011 and notched million-dollar sales in its first few editions.

However, Mr Rudolf said that from 2017 on, poor local sales had led to most exhibitors from overseas refusing to take part more than once in the fair.

Last year, there were 84 exhibitors at the fair, compared with 131 in 2017 and 170 in 2016.

Only 45 exhibitors signed up for this January's Art Stage Singapore, and they were left scrambling to find alternative space when Mr Rudolf pulled the plug on it days before the opening.

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UOB deputy chairman and CEO Wee Ee Cheong (centre) and Mr Eric Tham, head of UOB Group Commercial Banking (left), enjoying lo hei with some of the bank's clients at last night's Chinese New Year dinner and fundraising event. PHOTO: UOB

UOB event raises over \$1.6m

More than \$1.6 million was raised by United Overseas Bank (UOB) Group Commercial Banking at an annual fundraising event last night involving over 800 business owners from across the region.

Together with clients and colleagues, UOB ushered in the Year of the Pig with an evening of festive fun and generous giving at the Chinese New Year dinner held at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore.

Mr Wee Ee Cheong, deputy chairman and chief executive of UOB, kicked off the fundraising with a silent auction of a specially commissioned art piece.

The work, entitled "Everlasting Abundance", consisted of three watercolour paintings featuring a total of nine goldfish to represent wealth,

prosperity and longevity. The watercolours are the work of Mr Aaron Gan, the UOB Painting of the Year Singapore gold award winner in the established category in 2015. Mr Wee added the finishing touches.

Throughout the event, guests could pledge donations - which UOB matched dollar for dollar up to \$250,000 - to the fundraising campaign through a specially designed mobile app.

The beneficiaries of UOB's fundraising efforts this year are the Central Singapore Community Development Council, The Business Times Budding Artists Fund, The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund and The Red Pencil Singapore.

Vanessa Liu

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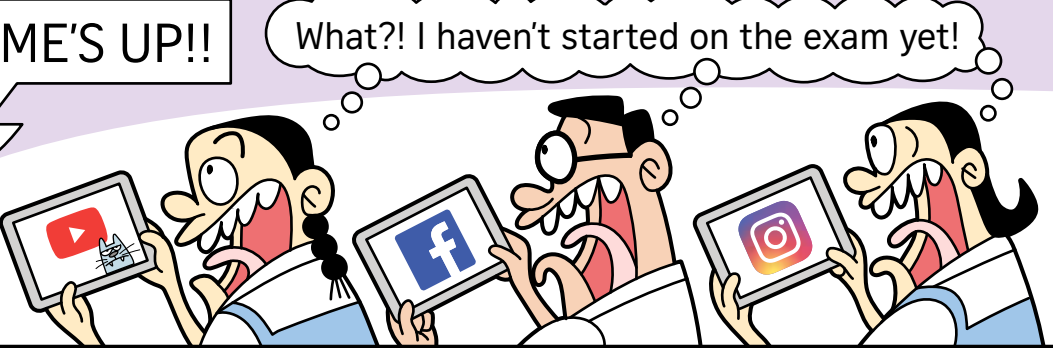
FORUM

cheeky's TAKE

Soon, instead of writing by hand, more exams could be taken electronically since digital devices are what students use in real life.



But, just like in real life, the students could easily be distracted while using those devices:



TIME'S UP!!

What?! I haven't started on the exam yet!

Never allow dictatorship-leaning behaviour here

I agree with Mr Osman Sidek, who said that while we appreciate the progress brought on by colonisation, we must also realise the indigenous society's sense of loss and injustice due to colonisation so as to develop our empathy towards many societies whose lands are occupied against their will even today (Anti-colonial sentiment directed at idea of colonisation; Feb 4).

More importantly, we must extend our empathy towards people living in countries ruled by dictators and oppressive regimes, where they are still being treated like second- and third-class citizens, even today.

In a similar vein, given the importance of the bicentennial commemoration, we must expressly commit to never allowing dictatorship-leaning behaviour to take root in a purpose-driven, pleasant, prosperous and progressive Singapore.

Cheang Peng Wah

Relook using property type as yardstick for rebates

With the upcoming Budget 2019, I urge the Government to relook the criteria for citizens to receive rebates and handouts.

Currently, the Government uses a person's residence as a yardstick to determine whether the citizen is eligible for rebates and handouts.

For example, if a person were to reside in a four-room Housing Board flat, he would automatically be eligible for certain handouts, regardless of the annual value of his flat or his annual income.

Conversely, if a person is residing in a private property, his eligibility for such rebates and handouts would automatically be minimal, even if the size and annual value of his property, as well as his income are much smaller than that of a person living in a four-room HDB flat.

With an increasing number of HDB flats exceeding a million dollars in value – which could surpass the value of an ageing private condominium unit – it is timely to review this yardstick.

Furthermore, we must not assume that a person is definitely well-off simply because he owns a private property, as there are citizens who are consigned to buying a private property because they do not qualify to purchase a resale HDB flat for various reasons.

Lee Yong Se

SGX needs to correct failed policies

I have been in the stockbroking industry for nearly 25 years and have not seen such malaise in the Singapore stock market, with so much shattered investor confidence.

Many fraudulent firms were listed and went bust with billions of dollars wiped out from poor, aggrieved investors' pockets.

Our investigations take forever, with not much accountability.

One common refrain is that investigators are not at liberty to disclose the nature of their investigations.

Meanwhile, investors have to suffer in silence, with little hope for recourse.

Several of us in the industry had written to the Government in 2015 about the urgent need to restore investor confidence, and provided suggestions on what could be done, but not much came out of it.

No one has taken responsibility for failed initial public offerings or decisions like the minimum trading price or reduction of bid-ask spreads, or tried to analyse if there was damage done to the markets.

The Singapore stock market used to be the market leader in Asean but now we have fallen behind Thailand, and continue to fall further behind still.

The bottom line for Singapore is to be a premier financial centre in the region, if not the world, and we need experienced people to run the markets.

However, they must be held accountable for failed policies.

Heads need not necessarily roll, but they must take ownership of failed policies and take the necessary corrective actions.

S. Nallakuruppan

WRITE IN: Letters should be meant for exclusive publication in The Straits Times. They should be no longer than 400 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone numbers. The Forum editor reserves the right to edit the letters. For women, please indicate Miss, Ms, Mrs or Madam. Please e-mail your letter to stforum@sph.com.sg. Readers can also respond to letters via Facebook and Twitter.

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MOM should create loan registry for maids

I completely disagree that foreign domestic workers (FDWs) do not need to seek employers' permission before taking loans (Maids may turn to loan sharks if they need boss' nod; Nov 20, 2018). In the last six months, I have discovered that my maid and my mother's maid took out various loans from authorised moneylenders, as letters demanding payment were sent to our respective home addresses.

We have since terminated the services of my mother's maid but she continues to harass me and my maid, demanding that we help to pay off her loan. FDWs live in our homes and are mostly relied on to care for our dependants. The risk of harm coming to our loved ones is great. Maids earn tiny salaries and mostly come from impoverished homes.

To expect them to make rational financial decisions when faced with personal emergencies at home is setting them up to fail. The interest rates are crippling and it will be, for the long term, good for FDWs to be open with their employers in such situations and seek financial assistance or salary advances rather than to turn to moneylenders who are out to gain from vulnerable people.

I suggest that the Ministry of Manpower create a loan registry for employers to see the full list of loans that their maids may have taken out. This would allow employers to monitor the situation before loans get out of hand and prevent a vicious circle of debt among people who are already struggling to break out of the poverty cycle. **Julia Chan Sook Yin**

Battlebox has always offered fair assessment of events

During his recent visit to the Battlebox, retired brigadier James Percival said that, in his memory, the place "hadn't been developed nearly as much as it is now" (Percival back in S'pore, 77 years after surrender; Feb 7). He then went on to say that the portrayal of the campaign is infinitely better now than it was when he was here before, and that it is a "more comprehensive" and a "fairer assessment of what went on than it had been before". I am afraid that Mr Percival has

misremembered what he saw. The Battlebox opened as a ticketed exhibition on Feb 15, 1997, on the 55th anniversary of the fall of Singapore. The comprehensive set-up he saw on Feb 4 was produced in 1997, not over the last few years. At the time, the narrative of the Battlebox focused fully on re-enacting the morning of Feb 15, 1942, in the hours before Singapore fell. It was based on information collated from years of research.

A portrayal of the Malayan Campaign was purposely avoided as it was something already widely discussed on various platforms and it was decided that familiar material and arguments should not be rehearsed. During his visit to the Battlebox in 1996, the bunker was still in the early stages of being turned into a World War II experience. There was no portrayal of the Malayan Campaign when he toured the bunker.

How is it then that the narrative he heard on this recent visit is "a fairer assessment" of something that did not then exist? While I am sympathetic to Mr Percival for having a name that is associated with the fall of Singapore, he should know that the Republic's institutions have never afforded his father an unfair assessment. We have known for decades that Singapore's fall was not his father's doing. **Tan Teng Teng (Ms)**

Sejarah Melayu in English available at library, online

We thank Mr Chin Kee Thou for his feedback (Precious insight into Singapore history; Feb 7). The Sejarah Melayu is currently on display in The First Print: Stories And Legends Of Early Singapore exhibition at level 11 of the National Library Building until March 24. Subsequently, a digital form of the rare book and selected items from the exhibition will be

displayed at four public libraries:

- Central Public Library – March 25 to April 28
- Jurong Public Library – April 29 to June 30
- Tampines Regional Library – July 1 to Sept 1
- Woodlands Regional Library – Sept 1 to Oct 31

Members of the public can also

access the earliest English translation of the Malay Annals by John Leyden in 1821 and a 1953 translation by Charles Cuthbert Brown in our Singapore and South-east Asian collection. These can be accessed at the National Library and via our online resources such as BookSG at <https://bit.ly/2Gb6NEw> and the NLB Mobile app. As Singapore marks the

bicentennial, we hope that these materials will promote a greater appreciation and awareness of Singapore's rich literary history. We encourage everyone to use the resources in our wide collection of historical materials on Singapore and the South-east Asian region. **Tan Huisim** Director National Library National Library Board

Be mindful of racial and religious issues

During the heated exchange in the recent incident involving a Gojek rider and driver, the passenger made a racial remark that might possibly provoke some quarters of society (Gojek rider's dispute with driver goes viral; Feb 2). As a former chairman of one of the committees in the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, I have learnt that racial and religious beliefs are visceral parts of the human psyche, and they can be sensitive and fragile.

Therefore, an undue comment about race or religion, even if said with good intentions, can result in unintended backlash, open up old wounds and create new fault lines in our multicultural society. We have observed how racial and religious controversies and conflicts have caused deep divisions in communities and polarised their people. When the social fabric is torn, it is hard to return the fabric back to its original values, strengths and functional conditions. Like glass, once harmony is broken, it is hard to put the pieces back together again. That is why our people, including leaders and people of

influence, should be mindful of the vulnerabilities of our racial and religious fabric. Everyone should exercise due care in his words and actions so that we can continue to develop a more stable, secure and sustainable level of racial and religious harmony. The law must send a strong message to the public that there is no place for any word or action that is prejudicial to the maintenance of racial and religious harmony here. **Patrick Liew Siow Gian (Dr)**

Everyone should exercise due care in his words and actions so that we can continue to develop a more stable, secure and sustainable level of racial and religious harmony.

Bike-parking information available on multiple platforms

We thank Mr Rahul Gupta for his letter (Where are the bike parking zones?; Feb 1). To locate the nearest public bicycle facilities, users can access maps provided under the "Bicycle Parking" function on the Land Transport Authority's MyTransport.SG mobile application and website. Both the mobile application and website provide up-to-date information on the locations of all public bicycle facilities, including bicycle-parking yellow boxes and racks. This information is also available via the mobile applications of

bicycle-sharing operators, which users will have to access at the point of renting the bicycles. Today, there are more than 211,000 bicycle parking spaces islandwide, with almost all homes and public amenities within a 400m radius – or a five-minute walk – from a bicycle-parking location. The Government will progressively increase the number of bicycle parking spaces for active mobility users to 267,000 islandwide by 2020. **Andrew Cheah** Director, Active Mobility Land Transport Authority

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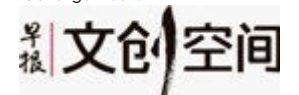
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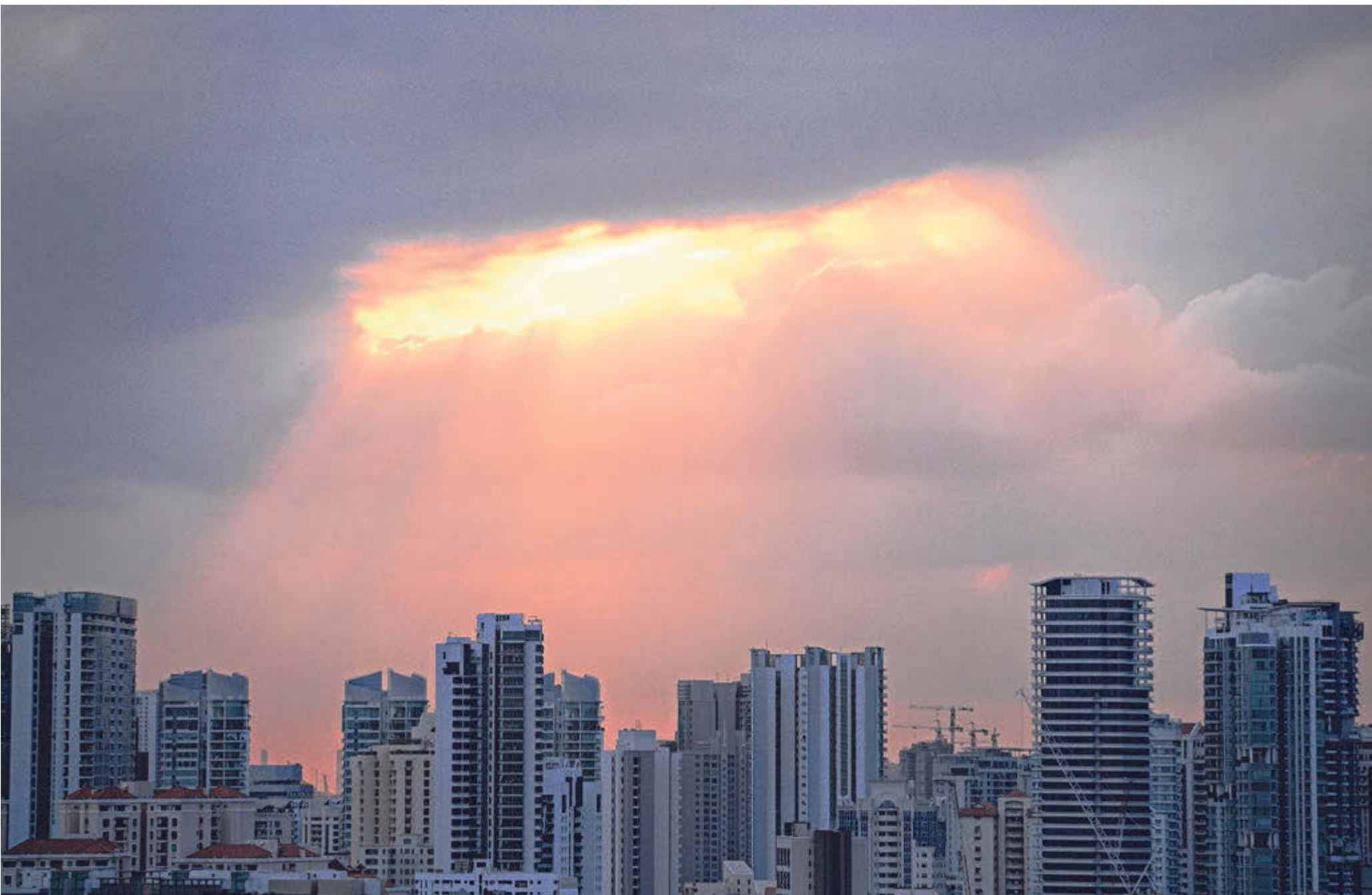
New Delhi



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Spot of sunshine

Evening sunlight breaking out of clouds over a part of Orchard Road in March 2013. Apartments in the prime District 9 continue to fetch a premium due to the area's proximity to Singapore's famous shopping belt.

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December retail sales fall more steeply than expected

Car sales take biggest hit; only one category sees year-on-year rise

Sue-Ann Tan

It was a blue Christmas for retailers, with sales well down last December – the second consecutive month of decline.

Takings at the till were 6 per cent below those of the same month in 2017, a far sharper fall than the 3.6 per cent slide forecast by economists in a Bloomberg poll.

It was also the biggest year-on-year sales drop since January last year, when takings fell 7.7 per cent.

The full-year numbers for last year were a little better, with sales down 0.7 per cent from 2017, although turnover registered a slight increase of 1.1 per cent if motor vehicles were stripped out.

Car sales last December took the biggest hit, as they did last November, tumbling 20.7 per cent year on year.

Excluding motor vehicles, retail turnover declined 3 per cent.

Besides motor vehicles, all but one retail category saw lower year-

on-year turnover.

Computer and telecommunications equipment transactions had the second-highest drop, declining 16.8 per cent year on year.

This was due to higher sales arising from major phone launches around the same period in 2017, the Department of Statistics noted when releasing the data yesterday.

Retailers of recreational goods recorded a sales slip of 5.8 per cent, while watches and jewellery were down 5.7 per cent. Furniture and household equipment turnover dropped by 3.9 per cent.

The only standout was medical goods and toiletries, which recorded an uptick in sales of 1.8 per cent from the previous year.

Maybank Kim Eng economist Lee Ju Ye said: “Consumers seem to be turning more cautious in their spending as economic growth slowed further in the fourth quarter.”

“Sales of discretionary items such as watches and jewellery and recreational goods are seeing steeper declines, which are in line with anecdotal evidence by upscale watch boutiques stating that business has been quiet during the Christmas season.”

She added that the December

slump could also be due to slowing tourist numbers.

She said: “November showed a sharp deceleration and passengers handled at Changi Airport have also slowed in December.”

“In particular, Chinese tourists, who account for 19 per cent of total visitor arrivals, may have continued

6%

Drop in sales last December from the same month in 2017.

3.6%

Last December's slide forecast by economists in a Bloomberg poll.

to decline in December as consumer sentiments are weakening on the back of a slowing economy and the US-China trade war.”

The total retail sales value last December was \$4.3 billion, with on-line transactions accounting for an estimated 5.5 per cent.

Sales of food and beverage services rose 4.5 per cent last December over the same period in 2017.

The total value of these services sold last December was estimated at \$925 million, compared with \$886 million in December 2017.

Mr Joseph Incalcaterra, chief economist for Asean at HSBC Global Research, said the decline was surprising but also in line with trends.

“The sharp drop in retail sales in December reaffirms that private consumption likely ended 2018 on a soft note,” he noted.

“While the magnitude of the decline surprised us, the weakness is nonetheless in line with indicators such as gradually decelerating wage growth and higher domestic interest rates, which have put downward pressure on discretionary spending.”

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NTUC urges higher wage payouts for younger low-income workers

Joanna Seow
Manpower Correspondent

The labour movement wants the Government to raise the income supplements for younger low-wage workers to reduce income inequality.

Payouts from the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) scheme, which tops up the incomes of those aged 35 and older and earning up to \$2,000 a month, should be the same for workers of all ages, instead of increasing with age, said National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) assistant secretary-general Zainal Sapari yesterday.

He made the call in a blog post ahead of this year's Budget Day on Feb 18, adding that it is timely to question the assumptions and intent of the scheme, as it is up for review.

He said one reason to raise the level of support for younger workers is that they are more likely to have young dependants.

The scheme gives higher payouts to older workers to incentivise them to join the workforce, but older low-wage workers are likely to work regardless of the WIS quantum, Mr Zainal said.

“I am not advocating for any reduction in the WIS payout to older workers, but for the payout to be the same across the different age groups based on their income,” he added.

Currently, for workers earning \$1,200 a month, a 65-year-old will get \$300 a month through WIS, while a 35-year-old is given only \$125, he noted. “If the WIS is intended to be an income supplement to reduce income inequality, then the payout quantum should be differentiated based on income only.”

Mr Zainal also recommended that the cash component of the WIS payout be raised to 80 per cent, up from 40 per cent. The rest goes into the Central Provident Fund (CPF) accounts of the workers.

“Since WIS is to supplement income, it should therefore translate to higher disposable income for the workers to address their immediate needs,” he said.

Results of the review of WIS will be out this year. The scheme was last enhanced in 2017.

Meanwhile, the NTUC also wants to make the progressive wage model mandatory in more sectors, beyond the existing cleaning, landscaping, security and lift maintenance industries.

Mr Zainal said the NTUC will keep working with industry stakeholders to assess the feasibility of expanding the model, which sets out career progression and minimum salaries for workers based on different skill levels.

He noted that even though many countries have a national minimum wage policy aimed at safeguarding workers' welfare, studies on the effectiveness of a minimum wage have been inconclusive.

In Singapore, WIS and Workfare Training Support, as well as the progressive wage model, have been implemented instead to help vulnerable workers in a sustainable manner through raising productivity and wages, he added.

Singapore University of Social Sciences economist Walter Theseira agreed with the call to review the underlying assumptions of the scheme.

But on raising the payout's cash component, he said if a worker has persistently low income, he may not set aside enough retirement savings apart from that in the CPF.

“The idea to give more payouts in cash is sound, but for it not to create a significant retirement liability problem years later, it has to be combined with larger overall payout quanta. That, in turn, is something which has to be examined for the cost implication,” he said.

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Serangoon MRT station on the North East Line, run by SBS Transit. The firm's revenue rose 16.1 per cent to \$1.38 billion for the 12 months to Dec 31, largely because of higher fees earned with the start of the Seletar bus package in March and the Bukit Merah package in November. Higher rail ridership from the first full-year operation of Downtown Line 3 contributed as well. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

SBS Transit's net profit surges 70% to record \$80m

Christopher Tan
Senior Transport Correspondent

New government bus contracts introduced last year drove earnings sharply north for transport operator SBS Transit (SBST).

The ComfortDelGro subsidiary posted a 70 per cent surge in net profit to a record \$80.1 million, it reported yesterday.

Revenue rose 16.1 per cent to \$1.38 billion for the 12 months to Dec 31, largely because of higher fees earned with the start of the Seletar bus package in March and the

Bukit Merah package in November.

Higher rail ridership from the first full-year operation of Downtown Line 3 contributed as well.

The average daily ridership for the whole line grew by 61.1 per cent to 450,000 trips a day last year, while the North East Line rose 2.7 per cent to 591,000 trips a day.

SBST's operating costs rose by 13.6 per cent to \$1.29 billion, with the biggest increase attributable to fuel and energy bills.

Earnings per share rose from 15.15 cents to 25.71 cents, while net asset value per share stood at \$1.60, up from \$1.44 a year earlier.

Directors recommended a final

AT A GLANCE

REVENUE: \$1.38 billion (+16.1%)

NET PROFIT: \$80.1 million (+70%)

DIVIDEND PER SHARE: 7.1 cents

dividend of 7.1 cents, up from 3.95 cents in the previous year.

SBST's total equity rose by 10.9 per cent to \$498.4 million as of Dec 31, fuelled by operational profits.

It posted a net cash inflow of

\$27.4 million – from new loans raised, net cash generated from operations, and proceeds from the sale of rail assets to the Land Transport Authority under the new rail financing framework.

The firm had short-term deposits and bank balances of \$32.7 million as of Dec 31.

After accounting for borrowings of \$75 million, it had a net debt position of \$42.3 million and a net gearing ratio of 8.5 per cent – versus 39.1 per cent as of the same time in 2017. Its gross gearing ratio was 15 per cent, versus 40.3 per cent as of Dec 31, 2017.

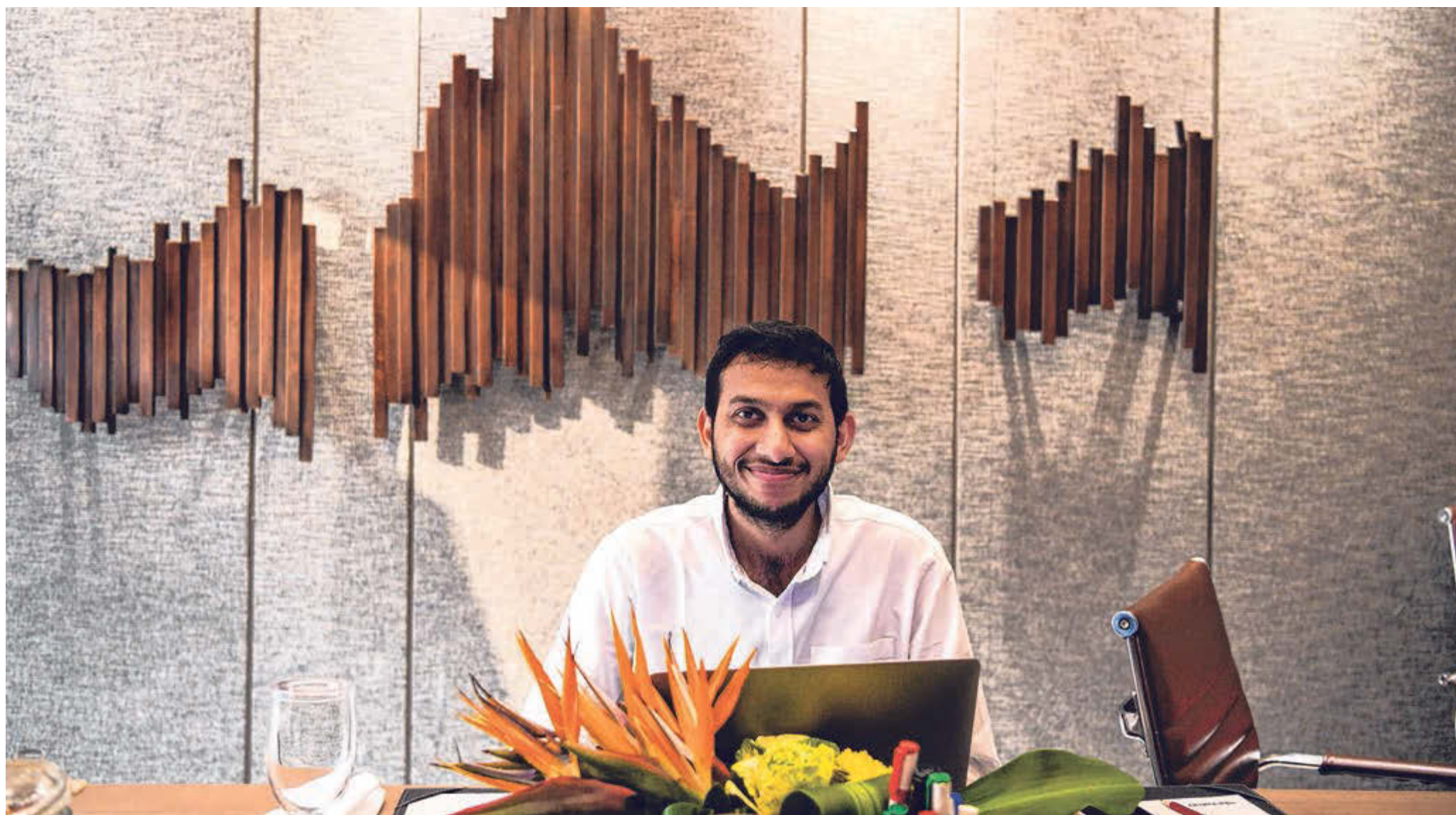
SBST expects public transport

revenue to continue to grow. Bus turnover will be higher with full-year contribution from the Seletar and Bukit Merah packages.

It said the rail business will “continue to face challenges from operating and maintenance costs” despite higher revenue expected from the 4.3 per cent fare adjustment effective on Dec 29, while the North East MRT line and Sengkang-Punggol LRT will undergo mid-life renewal of components.

SBST shares closed up four cents, or 1.36 per cent, to \$2.98 – the highest in more than 10 years.

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NO. 1 IN ASIA

Our long-term aspiration is to be the largest hotel chain built out of Asia in the years to come.



MR RITESH AGARWAL, chief executive officer of Oyo Hotels. He started the chain at the age of 19.

Mr Ritesh Agarwal started out with one hotel in Gurugram near Delhi. Oyo Hotels is now in eight countries, with plans to expand into the United States and further into South-east Asia, including Singapore. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Aiming to turn India's largest hotel chain into Asia's biggest

Oyo Hotels chief eyes S'pore as base for South-east Asian growth

Nirmala Ganapathy
India Bureau Chief
In New Delhi

One of India's youngest millionaires, Mr Ritesh Agarwal, who is the founder and chief executive of Oyo Hotels, India's largest hotel chain, has set his sights wider with plans to build the world's biggest hotel chain in Asia.

Over the last 1½ years, Mr Agarwal, 25, has expanded his business to China, Indonesia and Britain. This year, he entered the Philippines and is reported to be planning to take his brand to the United States and, further down the line, into other parts of South-east Asia, including Singapore.

Oyo Hotels, which is in eight countries, including Malaysia, Nepal and the United Arab Emirates, provides branding to budget hotels, standardisation of rooms, training of staff and amenities in exchange for a percentage of revenue.

In India, it has improved the quality of services of hundreds of lesser-known hotels and increased the re-

turns for their owners.

Mr Agarwal believes Singapore can be a base for him to expand further into South-east Asia.

"We believe Singapore is a very attractive opportunity for a hotel company. You will always find unbranded assets around Boat Quay and Clarke Quay, for example.

"We believe those small assets, with our refurbishment and interior designs, have the opportunity to compete with other branded hotels, and hence create better-quality living spaces for customers and better returns for asset owners," said Mr Agarwal in an interview with The Straits Times at his office in Gurugram, about 30km from New Delhi.

"Our long-term aspiration is to be the largest hotel chain built out of Asia in the years to come."

Oyo Hotels is part of a new wave of home-grown Indian online start-ups that are expanding to overseas markets. Last year, Ola Cabs, an Indian ride-sharing platform, entered Australia and has since expanded to Britain and New Zealand. Online tutoring start-up Byju's recently acquired US-based Osmo, a start-up that develops apps for children that use offline input, while digital wallet company Paytm launched its payment app PayPay in Japan.

"Oyo and Ola lead the third wave

of Indian MNCs (multinational corporations)," trumpeted Indian financial newspaper Mint in a recent opinion piece.

Mr Agarwal sees China as a great opportunity for a start. Oyo Hotels has expanded rapidly in the country within a year with more than 260,000 rooms in over 5,000 leased and franchised hotels. In India, it has 170,000 rooms in over 8,700 hotels.

He said China was undergoing a "consumer upgrade" and increasing numbers of customers were moving to branded hotels from unbranded ones.

Oyo Hotels has raised US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion) to fund expansion into China and other overseas markets from existing investors SoftBank Vision Fund, Sequoia Capital and Lightspeed Venture Partners.

Mr Agarwal's father is a former provision store owner and his mother is a housewife. He was born in the state of Odisha.

He started Oyo when he was 19, after travelling across India and encountering poor service at countless bed-and-breakfasts, guest houses and hotels. He realised there was a lack of affordable hotels providing good services.

He hid his plans from his parents and enrolled in a university in Delhi

to mollify them. But he said he managed to remain in university for only three days before his "entrepreneurial spirit" kicked in.

He was selected for the Thiel Fellowship – a programme sponsored by Facebook investor and PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel – which gives US\$100,000 to young people under 23 to start a business.

Mr Agarwal started out with one hotel in Gurugram near Delhi, where he worked as the front office and housekeeping manager.

He said there were a lot of scepticism about his venture, not least from his parents, who wanted him to get a degree.

He recalled that his mother was convinced about the move only when Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of the success of Oyo in a 2016 speech, and when she started seeing Oyo signs from their home in Bhubaneswar.

"From Oyo Hotels' perspective, our mission is very straightforward. We believe that, fundamentally, real estate for good quality living spaces is broken and needs to be improved.

"On the other hand, if you look worldwide, even if you think of Singapore, London, India, China, you will find hundreds of small hotels that have existed forever. They have no understanding on how to lease or

franchise a fewer-than-100 room building very well," he said.

But he admits that maintaining quality across the board is a challenge, particularly when 300,000 to 400,000 people stay in Oyo Hotels every day.

"We have been able to drive improvement for 92 per cent of our revenues to come from repeat customers," Mr Agarwal said.

Still, not everyone has a great Oyo experience all the time.

Mr S. Vaseekaran, 24, who works for a financial company, had a poor experience at an Oyo-branded hotel in the southern city of Chennai last year. "The room was not very good. It was very dark, no windows and there was a pungent smell," he said.

He later discovered that a wall on one side of the room was actually a window covered by a large black sticker.

"There were little holes so you could see through the glass. It was facing the stairs. I complained at the hotel and they said 'there was a curtain, so what was the problem'. It was a complete breach of privacy," he said.

Still, Mr Vaseekaran acknowledges that he has had mostly good experiences with Oyo Hotels and has continued to be a customer, largely because the rooms are affordable and it is easy to book them.

"I would say Oyo is a really good brand in aggregating hotels and (making it) easier for people to book hotels.

"But I feel it needs to screen hotels thoroughly. It's not possible to solve each and every problem, but it is not a start-up, (and) it should be able to respond to customers in a much better way," he said.

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Push for Indonesia's younger workers to embrace Industry 4.0

Linda Yulisman
Indonesia Correspondent
In Jakarta

Post office employee Alviah has not heard about "Industry 4.0", let alone how it is important for Indonesia's future.

She said: "I am familiar with Gojek and Shopee, as I often use them for rides and shopping because they are very convenient. But I am not sure what Industry 4.0 is about."

The 24-year old university graduate is, however, aware of the changing nature of work due to technology, as seen in electronic toll collection, which replaces workers with machines. She also believes such transformation can affect her job in the future.

Alviah, who goes by only one name, said: "We must be ready and master the technology. Otherwise, we cannot move forward."

She hopes the government will help young people like her upgrade their skills, such as through training and vocational education.

Industry 4.0 refers to industrial digital technologies from 3D printing and the Internet of Things (IoT) to artificial intelligence and cloud computing – things the experts say

will reshape and revitalise global economies.

The Indonesian government in April last year launched a road map called Making Indonesia 4.0, zooming in on the need to develop the manufacturing sector by enhancing distribution, developing industrial estates and empowering small and medium-sized enterprises, among others.

The government picked five sectors – food and beverage, textile and garment, automotive, chemicals and electronics – as the initial prime drivers.

But, according to a report last year by global consultancy firm McKinsey & Company – which engaged more than 200 business leaders in Asean – only 13 per cent of the companies in the region had begun to implement Industry 4.0, even though the majority of them were confident about its prospects.

McKinsey estimates that Industry 4.0 will have a significant impact on Indonesia's industry – with digitisation likely adding US\$120 billion (S\$162 billion) to its gross domestic product by 2025.

Yet, in Indonesia – the world's fourth-most populous country with more than 260 million people – there are concerns over what will



Workers sewing military uniforms at the Sri Rejeki Isman factory in Central Java. The company has adopted automation and IoT to lower operational costs and enhance its competitive edge both locally and globally. PHOTO: SRI REZEKI ISMAN

EDUCATION VITAL

The key is education and we must start it.



INDONESIAN VICE-PRESIDENT JUSUF KALLA, acknowledging the urgency to improve the capacity of the labour force to transition into Industry 4.0.

happen to the legion of young workers with low skills, as it embraces the fourth industrial revolution.

The working-age population – those aged between 15 and 64 – in South-east Asia's biggest economy was 67.32 million in 2017, accord-

ing to World Bank data.

Indonesia's total employment of 121.02 million – in fields such as agriculture, manufacturing and services – is still dominated by low-skilled workers, according to figures from Indonesia's National Development Planning Agency.

About 90 per cent of workers in the manufacturing sector, for instance, are low-skilled, while another 6.5 per cent are semi-skilled. Only about 3 per cent of them are skilled.

Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla acknowledged the urgent need to improve the capacity of the labour force to transition into Industry 4.0, which will change the characteristics of existing jobs.

"The key is education and we

must start it," he said.

However, not everyone is late to jump onto the bandwagon. A number of big Indonesian firms have already embarked on Industry 4.0, and they cite greater efficiency and productivity as the main reason.

Indonesia's largest textile and garment manufacturer Sri Rejeki Isman (Sritex) has adopted automation and IoT in its factory in Sukaharjo, Central Java, since 2015, in pursuit of lower operational costs and to enhance its competitive edge both locally and globally.

Automation, for instance, allows better-quality checks in the production of large volumes of fabric, said Sritex spokesman Joy Citradewi.

She added that colour consistency was one aspect to control. "Because of automation, the lead time in one manufacturing process has dwindled by half. So the impact is very significant on the production."

Sritex's clients include Asia's top clothing retailer Fast Retailing's Uniqlo and global fashion giant H&M.

The company also uses other smart technologies in other factory processes to make things easier, such as the purchase of raw materials, whose prices often fluctuate. This has enabled it to manage its resources better.

Another company, Indonesia's biggest petrochemical producer Chandra Asri Petrochemical, has also benefited in the new age of smart machines.

It has applied automation, robotics and artificial intelligence in its naphtha cracker and synthetic rubber factory plant in Cilegon, Banten.

The introduction of these technologies has helped cut the rate of

emergency shutdowns from monthly to only once or twice a year.

The availability of big data has also prompted the company to adjust its production plan on a daily basis, rather than on a monthly basis like it did in the past.

Mr Suhat Miyarso, Chandra Asri's vice-president for corporate relations, said: "The production processes are transparent and can be monitored by whole staff through the Internet or mobile phones."

To sync new workers with the fourth industrial revolution, the government has kick-started educational institutions. Last December, it launched a pilot project to train workers to equip them with industrial skills for the digital economy in two vocational schools in Malang, East Java. There is also another pilot project to develop Industry 4.0 mini factories in three polytechnics in Bandung in West Java, Makassar in South Sulawesi, and Yogyakarta.

The government is also helping to establish an Industry 4.0 innovation and human resource development centre in Jakarta, and a big data and analytics centre at a Bali-based industrial education and training centre.

Indonesian Employers' Association chairman Hariyadi Sukamdani said the group will propose the establishment of a multi-stakeholder digital capability centre to support the transition for local companies.

He said: "We need the capability centre to understand what should be done with people with limited skills when Industry 4.0 materialises. We'll discuss it while the process continues."

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SINGAPORE BUDGET CONVERSATIONS

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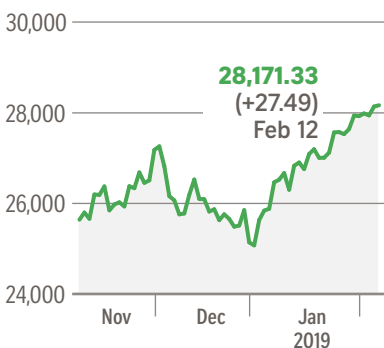
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Weak retail sales data weighs down STI

Most Asian markets post gains on optimism over US-China trade talks

Leila Lai

Most regional markets racked up gains yesterday, but local investors failed to keep shares in the black after a gloomy afternoon session.

The post-lunch hangover left the Straits Times Index (STI) down 5.12 points, or 0.16 per cent, to 3,201.15.

The index held onto early gains before the midday break, then took a bumpy ride down after local retail sales data showed a 6 per cent year-on-year decline in December and a 0.7 per cent slump for last year.

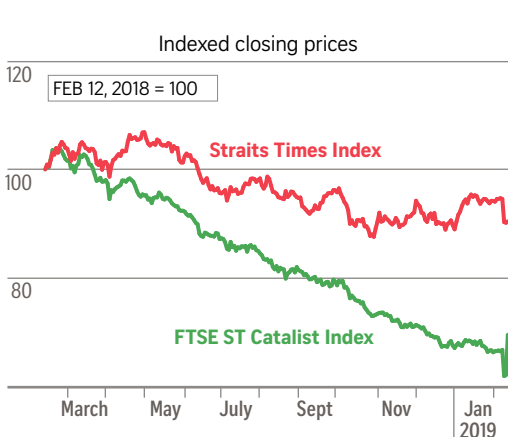
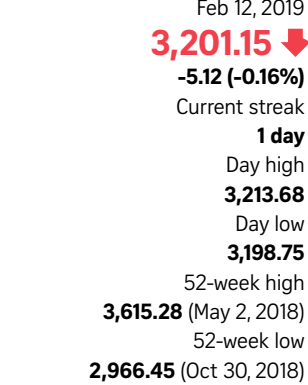
Meanwhile, markets in China, South Korea and Japan edged higher on hopes that the United States and China could work out their differences as they resume trade talks in Beijing.

But gains were capped by tensions from the presence of two US Navy warships in a Chinese-claimed part of the South China Sea and uncertainty over trade talks.

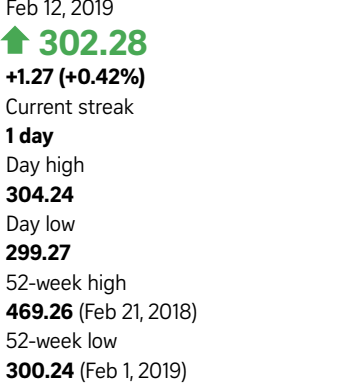
“Due to the complexity of the trade issues... markets are probably not putting too much hope on the talks to yield a major breakthrough,” CMC Markets analyst Margaret Yang noted.

“What concerns us is whether the tariffs deadline can be removed or extended beyond March 1, because that will bring material impact to growth and earnings.”

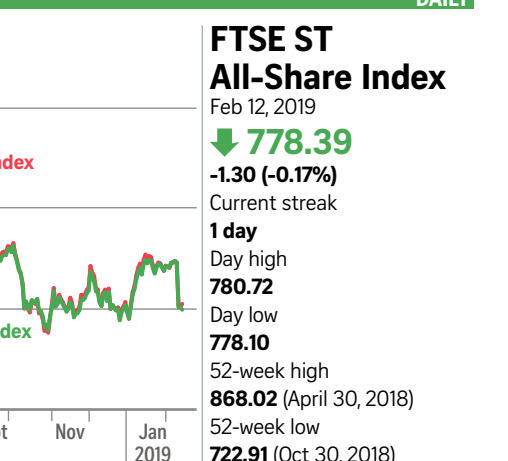
Straits Times Index



FTSE ST Catalyst Index



FTSE ST All-Share Index



Losers here outnumbered gainers 210 to 184 on trade of 1.15 billion shares worth \$969.22 million.

Market activity should pick up in the next two to three weeks heading into the thick of the earnings season, said Mr Marcus Toh of

Phillip Capital.

The three banks plus Venture Corp and CapitalLand will likely see movement when they report full-year results next week.

Yesterday's actives included Ezion Holdings, which closed up

4.44 per cent to 4.7 cents on trade of 83.4 million.

Mapletree Industrial Trust retreated 1.97 per cent to \$1.99 on volume of 12.7 million units.

The trust said yesterday that it had closed a private placement exercise, issuing 103.36 million new units at \$1.945 per unit, or a 4.2 per cent discount to its Monday close.

The placement raised about \$201 million, mainly to finance the acquisition of 18 Tai Seng Street.

RHB Research has initiated coverage on ESR Reit with a “buy” call and target price of 61 cents. Analyst Vijay Natarajan noted that benefits from the trust's recent merger with Viva Industrial Trust are starting to flow through.

ESR Reit closed flat at 51.5 cents.

TSH Corp closed down 18.42 per cent to 31 cents on its first day of trading after a reverse takeover by the owners of liquor group Slashed!.

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Straits Times Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY LAST TRADED SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD%	P/BV
278	245	Ascendas Reit	273	-1	9770	5.9	1.3
192	161	CapitaCom Trust	188	-1	11657	4.6	1
380	298	CapitalLand	330	-2	5753	3.6	0.7
243	195	CapitaMall Trust	238	-1	6580	4.8	1.2
1359	780	CityDev	927	-11	2175	1.9	0.8
251	196	ComfortDelGro	233	unch	5586	4.5	2
3128	2265	DBS Grp	2434	-2	2678	5.9	1.4
994	767	DairyFarm USD	US878	-18	963	2.4	-
133	85.5	Genting Sing	109	+1	22990	3.2	1.7
37	22.5	Golden Agri-Res	25	-0.5	7086	3.2	0.6
37	22.5	HPH Trust USD	US210	+0.5	4106	10.1	0.4
744	588	HongkongLand USD	US710	+6	2173	2.8	0.3
7000	1099	JMH USD	US6833	-27	444	2.3	0.7
4078	3155	JSH USD	US3931	-19	257	0.8	0.4
3828	2766	Jardine C&C	3635	-84	679	3.2	1.8
835	567	Keppel Corp	603 cd	+2	1446	5	1
1404	1036	OCBC Bank	1149	-4	3507	3.2	1.2
564	455	SATS	486	+4	2136	3.7	3.4
778	672	SGX	758	unch	3767	4	9
1184	914	SIA	965	-6	1337	4.1	0.8
292	231	SPH	248	+1	1858	5.2	1.1
376	321	ST Engineering	374	+4	3414	4	5.5
341	243	Sembcorp Ind	254	-1	1768	2.7	0.7
358	283	Singtel	303	-2	14413	6.8	1.7
92	57.5	ThaiBev	72	+1	28619	0.9	3.5
3037	2380	UOB	2534	unch	1359	3.9	1.2
898	591	UOL	651	-6	1111	2.7	0.6
2965	1320	Venture Corp	1588	-9	674	3.8	2
335	297	Wilmar Intl	324	-2	6252	3.1	0.9
154	84	YZJ Shipbldg SGD	141	unch	16281	3.2	1

FTSE ST Large & Mid-Cap Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY LAST TRADED SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD%	P/BV
278	245	Ascendas Reit	273	-1	9770	5.9	1.3
120	105	Ascott Reit	115	-1	3214	6.2	1
74.5	59	Bumitama Agri	68	-0.5	378	1.1	1.6
178	143	CDL HTrust	158	-2	3117	-	1
192	161	CapitaCom Trust	188	-1	11657	4.6	1
380	298	CapitalLand	330	-2	5753	3.6	0.7
243	195	CapitaMall Trust	238	-1	6580	4.8	1.2
1359	780	CityDev	927	-11	2175	1.9	0.8
251	196	ComfortDelGro	233	unch	5586	4.5	2
3128	2265	DBS Grp	2434	-2	2678	5.9	1.4
994	767	DairyFarm USD	US878	-18	963	2.4	-
73.5	59	Far East HTrust	64	-1	5036	-	0.7
183	150	First Resources	173	+1	344	3.9	2.3
231	212	Fraser's Cpt Tr	229	+2	3753	5.2	110.1
112	101	Fraser's L&I Tr	110	-1	5852	6.2	12
133	85.5	Genting Sing	109	+1	22990	3.2	1.7
37	22.5	Golden Agri-Res	25	-0.5	7086	3.2	0.6
224	167	GuocoLand Ltd	185	unch	236	3.8	0.6
37	23	HPH Trust USD	US210	+0.5	4106	10.1	0.4
744	588	HongkongLand USD	US710	+6	2173	2.8	0.3
7000	1099	JMH USD	US6833	-27	444	2.3	0.7
4078	3155	JSH USD	US3931	-19	257	0.8	0.4
3828	2766	Jardine C&C	3635	-84	679	3.2	1.8
58	44.5	Keppel Infra Tr	49.5	-0.5	15080	7.5	1.8
835	567	Keppel Corp	603 cd	+2	1446	5	1
124	108	Keppel Reit	123	+1	9229	4.5	0.9
151	125	Man Oriental USD	205 cd	+1	3069	5.5	3.6
273	170	Man Oriental USD	US202	unch	41	1.5	-
186	152	Mapletree Com Tr	179	-1	8830	5.1	12
206	184	Mapletree Ind Tr	199 cd	-4	12669	5.9	1.3
140	118	Mapletree Log Tr	136	-3	15464	5.6	1.2
128	107	Mapletree NAC Tr	126	+1	7499	5.9	1
83	73	NetLink NBN Tr	80.5	+0.5	10278	-	1
1404	1036	OCBC Bank	1149	-4	3507	3.2	1.2
199	136	OUE	154	+3	175	1.9	0.4
87	64.5	OUE HTrust	71	unch	1848	-	0.9
250	157	Olam Intl	189	+2	288	4	1
59	28	Oxley	29.5	-0.5	3494	5.1	0.8
291	256	ParkwayLife Reit	281	unch	544	4.6	1.5
121	98	Raffles Medical	111	unch	668	2	2.6
564	455	SATS	486	+4	2136	3.7	3.4
778	672	SGX	758	unch	3767	4	9
1184	914	SIA	965	-6	1337	4.1	0.8
337	220	SIA Engineering	231	-8	2484	5.6	1.7
292	231	SPH	248	+1	1858	5.2	1.1
103	98	SPHREIT	102	unch	1913	5.4	1.1
376	321	ST Engineering	374	+4	3414	4	5.5
341	243	Sembcorp Ind	254	-1	1768	2.7	0.7
269	149	Sembcorp Marine	158	-1	3550	1.3	1.4
58	39	Silverlake Axis	51	+1	5523	5.9	7.4
145	88.5	SingPost	95.5 cd	+1	4634	3.7	1.3
358	283	Singtel	303	-2	14413	6.8	1.7
286	158	StarHub	190	-1	1838	8.4	5.8
74	63.5	StarhillGbl Reit	70	-1	4669	6.5	0.8
199	163	Suntree Reit	163	unch	8103	5.3	0.9
92	57.5	ThaiBev	72	+1	28619	0.9	3.5
10.2	3.7	Thomson Medical	8	+0.3	37523	-	2.9
3037	2380	UOB	2534	unch	1359	3.9	1.2
898	591	UOL	651	-6	1111	2.7	0.6
2965	1320	Venture Corp	1588	-9	674	3.8	2
335	297	Wilmar Intl	324	-2	6252	3.1	0.9
226	183	Wing Tai	203	-1	435	3.9	0.5
154	84	YZJ Shipbldg SGD	141	unch	16281	3.2	1
182	116	Yanlord Land	139	-1	2740	4.9	0.5

FTSE ST Small-Cap Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	LAST SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD%	P/BV
145	129	AIMSAMP Cap Reit	139 cd	unch	671	7.4	1
68.5	48	Accordia Golf Tr	55	-0.5	1279	7	0.6
86.5	74	Ascendas-hTrust	85	+0.5	1058	-	0.9
119	99	Ascendas-iTrust	110	-2	1118	5.5	1.3
58	12.2	Asian Pay TV Tr	13.2	-0.1	418	49.2	0.2
64	48	Banyan Tree	60.5	+1	242	1.7	0.8
333	115	Best World	329	-1	3049	12	11.8
85.5	76	Boustead	80	unch	22	3.8	1.2
126	79.5	BreadTalk	90.5	+0.5	319	7.7	2.4
632	521	Bukit Sembawang	564	+1	12	3.2	1.1
87	65.5	Cache Log Trust	71.5	unch	1628	8.3	1.1
52	39.5	Centurion	40.5	+0.5	363	6.2	0.7
166	104	China Aviation	129	+5	3409	3.5	1.1
46	29.5	China Everbright	34	-1	6407	1.4	0.7
165	90.5	China Sunshine	134	+5	1849	2.2	1.5
103	64	Chip Eng Seng	70.5	+1	5085	5.7	0.6
53.5	31.5	Cosco	35.5	unch	3444	-	1.5
700	302	Delong	577	-3	7	-	0.6
27.5	17.5	Duty Free Intl	20 xd	unch	35	9.3	1.3
77	67.5	EC World Reit	74.5	+0.5	286	8.1	0.9
59	47	ESR-REIT	51.5	unch	1453	7.5	1.1
140	92	First Reit	105	-4	2855	8.2	1
152	135	Fraser's Com Tr	147	+1	1556	6.5	0.9
80	66.5	Fraser's HTrust	73.5	unch	399	-	1
25.5	16.4	Geo Energy Res	19.8	+0.1	1072	5.1	1.2
91	70.5	HRnetGroup	77.5	+0.5	451	3	2.4
67.5	52	Health Mgt Intl	53.5 cd	-0.5	506	0.6	5.1
279	73	Hi-P Intl	101	-1	5808	24.8	1.5
283	252	Hong Leong Fin	268	+1	52	4.9	0.6
80.5	71	IREIT Global	75.5	unch	89	7.9	1.1
37	18.3	Indofood Agri	21.5	-0.5	327	-	0.3
84	43	Japfa	78.5	-1.5	4516	0.6	1.5
76.5	49	KSH	50.5	-0.5	5	4.4	0.9
85	53	Keppel-KBS Reit USD	66.5	unch	350	9.4	0.6
149	128	Keppel DC Reit	143	unch	6374	5.1	1.3
189	132	Keppel T&T	188	unch	193	-	1.2
119	7	KrisEnergy	8.3	+0.2	18123	-	1
71	44.5	Lian Beng	49	unch	386	4.6	0.4
40.5	18	Lippo Malls Tr	24.5	unch	1862	14	0.9
53	30	MM2 Asia	33	+0.5	218	-	1.8
95	69.5	ManulifeReit USD	86 cd	+0.5	2723	6.5	0.8
120	95	Metro	99.5	+0.5	29	5	0.6
21	5	Noble	8.1	susp	-	-	-
63.4	45	OUE Com Reit	49.5	unch	524	7	0.7
66	54	PEC	57	-	-	3.5	0.6
39.5	17	POSH	18.3	-	-	-	0.5
64.5	44.5	Q&M Dental	48	-0.5	261	3.4	3.4
110	55.5	QAF Ltd	69.5	-1	121	7.2	0.8
124	96	Riverstone	112	unch	27	2.1	3.7
54.5	22	SIIC Environment	33.5	+0.5	439	-	0.6
45	38	Sabana Reit	42	unch	690	7.6	0.7
119	90.5	Sheng Siong	108	-2	2851	3.1	6
25.5	3.3	Sino Grandness	5.3	+0.1	3358	-	0.1
69	56	SoilbuildBizReit	60.5	+0.5	713	8.7	1
129	80.5	Tianjin ZX USD	91	+3	637	-	0.7
46.5	32.5	Tuan Sing	38.5 cd	unch	95	2.3	0.4
136	54	UMS	68	-0.5	3021	7.4	1.6
112	58.5	Valuetronics	73.5	-1.5	3536	6.2	168.3
15	8.3	Ying Li Intl	12.5	unch	4483	-	0.3
48.5	24	Yoma Strategic	36.5	+2	10440	0.7	1
33	16.1	Yongnam	17.3	unch	162	-	0.3

Mixed year for life insurance industry

New business premiums up 3%; sales of single-premium plans dip

Lorna Tan
Senior Correspondent

The life insurance industry had a mixed year in 2018 with growth in some areas but contraction in others. The sector posted a 3 per cent expansion in weighted new business premiums to \$4.2 billion for the 12 months compared with 2017. While sales of annual premium products had stable growth of 6 per cent to \$2.78 billion, there was a 3 per cent dip in the uptake of single-premium plans to \$1.42 billion.

The Life Insurance Association (LIA) attributed the lacklustre sales of single-premium plans to turbulent markets late last year, combined with the regulatory requirement to remove the sales charge from Central Provident Fund Investment Scheme (CPFIS) products. These include unit trusts and investment-linked insurance plans. LIA president Patrick Teow said yesterday: "Changes to the CPFIS significantly impacted the last quarter of 2018, which saw single-premium CPFIS-included products recording \$29 million in weighted premiums, a decline of 62 per cent compared with the three months ended Sept 30, 2018."

Sales charges for CPFIS products were halved to 1.5 per cent last October and will be removed entirely from Oct 1 this year. The aim is to reduce the cost of investment for CPFIS members while targeting the scheme at those with the knowledge and risk appetite to invest. The industry also noted yesterday that it recorded an increase of 48 per cent in the uptake of policies designed to provide regular payouts to customers in retirement. The LIA said 38,120 policies were bought last year, up 12,345 on 2017. Retirement policies accounted for about 8 per cent or \$338 million of total weight premiums for the year, compared with 5 per cent for 2017. Mr Teow said: "People are living longer and are concerned whether they have enough funds for retirement. Insurers have been creative in their product offerings such as providing cover to age 100."

total sum assured for new business to nearly \$140 billion last year. Integrated Shield Plans (IPs) and IP rider premiums accounted for 92 per cent or \$388.3 million of total new business premiums for individual health insurance, which totalled \$424 million for last year. The remaining 8 per cent came from the uptake of other medical plans and riders. An additional 64,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents were covered by IPs as of Dec 31 last year. Approximately 68 per cent of Singapore residents have IP coverage to complement MediShield Life. Most IP insurers are bearing underwriting losses in their portfolio, which has led to rising premiums of IPs and IP riders in recent years. Mr Teow warned that this premium trend may continue for another two to three years before initiatives, such as a pre-authorisation medical panel and schedule of medical fees, can take effect. Insurers must launch new IP riders by April where the co-payment benefit is 5 per cent, compared with 10 per cent now. There will be a co-payment cap of \$3,000 per policy year.

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CompanyBriefs

Hyflux

Hyflux has given creditors and stakeholders a two-week extension to file their proofs of claim ahead of scheme meetings as the water treatment firm undergoes debt restructuring. The new deadline has now been pushed back to 5pm on March 1, from 5pm on Feb 15 previously, the company announced in a regulatory filing on Monday night. Holders of the company's notes, perpetual securities and preference shares who do not file a proof will be deemed to have authorised the company to file a proof on their behalf, based on their holdings as recorded in the Central Depository, Hyflux said. Hyflux's call for proofs has caused some confusion among holders of its securities. Some were also angry with the timing of the news released during the Chinese New Year period, and that they had only two weeks to file their proofs with the old deadline. Separately, Hyflux group executive vice-president Cheong Aik Hock noted in an affidavit filed with the High Court on Feb 8 that the process of calling for proofs is intended to be "administratively efficient", and to allow the "restructuring agreement to be effected". "I stress that the Hyflux Group has no intention whatsoever to hinder or prevent any of its stakeholders from voting on the scheme of arrangement to be proposed," he added.

CBRE

Ms Pauline Goh will assume the post of CBRE's chairman for South-east Asia, a role that will be "more client-centric, focused on nurturing and growing strategic client accounts across South-east Asia", the company said yesterday. She was formerly chief executive for Singapore and South-east Asia for the property consultancy since 2010. Meanwhile, CBRE veteran Moray Armstrong has been appointed managing director of the Singapore business, after previously serving as managing director of the advisory and transactions team. Mr Vikram Kohli is now chief operating officer overseeing the entire South-east Asia region including Singapore, after having been regional managing director for South-east Asia with a focus on markets outside of Singapore. Given Singapore's importance as a hub for the company's regional business, Ms Goh said "we need a dedicated leader to take the company and people forward in this next phase of growth". The three will report to Mr Anshuman Magazine, chairman and chief executive of India, South-east Asia, Middle East and Africa.



Sakae Holdings, which runs the Sakae Sushi restaurant chain, said a streamlining of operations resulted in a fall in revenue, while the cost of sales and labour expenses dropped accordingly. It posted a net loss of \$469,000 for the first half, compared with \$305,000 in net profit the year before. ST FILE PHOTO

Sakae posts Q2 net loss of \$545,000 on lower revenue

A sharp fall in revenue left the profits cupboard bare at the firm that runs the Sakae Sushi restaurant chain. Sakae Holdings reported a net loss of \$545,000 for the second quarter, from earnings of \$99,000 in the same period last year. This was attributed to a streamlining of operations that resulted in a fall in revenue, while the cost of sales and labour expenses dropped accordingly, the company said yesterday. Revenue came in at \$11.2 million for the three months to Dec 31, down 39.6 per cent. Loss per share was 0.39 cent compared with earnings per share of 0.07 cent a year earlier. The streamlining of group operations also resulted in reductions in

administrative expenses by 22.4 per cent to \$5.4 million, from \$6.9 million the year before. Labour costs also decreased, down 14 per cent to \$4.3 million. Other administrative expenses, including depreciation charges, declined as well. Other operating expenses were at \$2.7 million, a 3.2 per cent decrease from \$2.8 million the year before, resulting in improved margins. The group's gross profit was \$7 million, down from \$9.5 million the year before. Gross profit margins increased by 11.4 percentage points to 62.5 per cent. It posted a net loss of \$469,000 for the first half, compared with \$305,000 in net profit the year before. Revenue fell 38.2 per cent to \$21.6 million.

AT A GLANCE

REVENUE: \$11.2 million (-39.6%)
NET LOSS: \$545,000 (not meaningful)

Interbank currency rates

Currencies	Against S\$	Feb 12	Against US\$	Feb 12
	Bid	Offer	Bid	Offer
S\$/US\$ to one unit of foreign currency:				
Australian dollar	0.9621	0.9623	0.7082	0.7083
Canadian dollar	10229	10233	0.7532	0.7530
Euro	15331	15339	1.1285	1.1290
NZ dollar	0.9144	0.9150	0.6731	0.6735
Sterling pound	1.7497	1.7504	1.2880	1.2884
US dollar	1.3585	1.3586	-	-
S\$/US\$ to 100 units of foreign currency:				
Chinese renminbi	20.0452	20.0487	14.7554	14.7569
Danish kroner	20.5447	20.5494	15.1231	15.1254
Hong Kong dollar	17.31	17.31	12.7415	12.7416
Indian Rupee	192	192	14.124	14.125
Indonesian rupiah	0.0097	0.0097	0.0071	0.0071
Japanese yen	12282	12284	0.9041	0.9042
Korean won	0.1207	0.1209	0.0888	0.0890
Malaysian ringgit	33.30	33.33	24.5098	24.5339
New Taiwan dollar	4.4033	4.4050	3.2413	3.2423
Norwegian krone	15.6194	15.6278	11.4976	11.5028
Philippine peso	2.6055	2.6077	1.9179	1.9194
Saudi riyal	36.2238	36.2274	26.6645	26.6652
Swedish krona	14.6327	14.6401	10.7712	10.7759
Swiss franc	135.2549	135.2783	99.5619	99.5778
Thai Baht	4.3320	4.3350	3.1888	3.1908

Source: OBC

Government securities

Period	Issue code	Coupon rate (%)	Maturity	Close Bid	High	Day's Low
GOVERNMENT BONDS						
2-Year	NY05100N	3.250%	01-Sep-20	101.92	0.00	0.00
5-Year	N519100A	2.000%	01-Feb-24	99.79	99.80	99.80
10-Year	NX18100A	2.625%	01-May-28	103.72	103.81	103.75
15-Year	NZ13100V	3.375%	01-Sep-33	111.58	111.65	111.55
20-Year	N216100X	2.250%	01-Aug-36	96.66	96.80	96.80
30-Year	NA16100H	2.750%	01-Mar-46	102.32	102.70	102.40

Note: Based on latest issue

Source: Monetary Authority of Singapore

MSCI INDICES

Feb 11	Index	In local curr %dy	%yr Change
World Preliminary	1548.7	0.2	7.4
EAFE Preliminary	1065.9	0.6	5.8
Europe Preliminary	1494.7	0.9	6.4
Australia	1217.7	-0.3	6.7
Austria Preliminary	543.4	0.9	9.1
Belgium Preliminary	1001.5	0.9	9.5
Canada Preliminary	1994.4	-0.1	8.9
Denmark Preliminary	7933.2	1.1	7.1
Finland Preliminary	725.4	0.7	11.1
France Preliminary	1812.8	1.0	5.8
Germany Preliminary	879.9	1.0	4.3
Greece Preliminary	46.1	1.5	6.3
India	1264.4	-0.8	0.1
Indonesia	7362.0	-0.4	4.1
Ireland Preliminary	194.2	1.4	8.4
Israel Preliminary	252.8	0.7	9.6
Italy Preliminary	663.8	1.0	6.7
Japan	921.2	0.0	3.1
Korea	653.6	0.2	8.2
Malaysia	586.2	0.0	0.8
Netherlands Preliminary	1595.9	0.7	9.5
New Zealand	140.6	0.4	6.0
Norway Preliminary	2882.3	0.4	3.5
Pakistan	399.5	-1.9	11.9
Philippines	1368.5	0.0	8.4
Portugal Preliminary	84.6	0.3	4.8
Singapore	1666.1	-0.1	4.5
Singapore Free	358.2	-0.1	4.5

Source: MSCI

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In Loving Memory



DAVID COLVIN SCOTT

13th February 2011

Always loved, forever missed

Mollie Low-Scott

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." 2 Timothy 4:7

13th Anniversary
In Loving Memory Of Our Mother

ONG BEE CHOO
Departed on 12th February 2006
Deeply remembered by Family & Loved Ones.

Athma Shanthi Pooja
We, the Family of the Late
K. Sashi
Departed on 6 January 2019
Wish to express our heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all relatives and friends for their kind assistance, attendance and condolences during our recent bereavement.

Athma Shanthi Pooja 40th Day Prayers will be held on Friday 15 February 2019 at 7.15pm at Sri Sivan Temple, 24 Geylang East Avenue 2, Singapore 389752
Please treat this as a personal invitation.
HP: 9788 1037 / 9071 3221



"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"
Matthew 5:4



S. PANDITHURAI MICHEAL
Age: 79

was called home to be with the Lord on 12/2/19, leaving behind loved ones.
Wife: Katherine d/o Muthiah
Daughter: Parimala
Wake is held at St Theresa Home (Wake Hall), 49 Upper Thomson Road. Tel: 9115 6071
Mass will be held on 14/2/19 (Thu) at 7.30am. Thereafter, cortege leaves at 8.15am for Mandai Crematorium Hall 2 for cremation at 9am.



Cherished and Always Remembered



Mr Ong Tiong Tat and Mdm Irene Tan Liang Kheng
Called Home on 14 February 2013 and 13 February 2016

*Their lives were earnest, their actions kind,
Generous hands and active minds,
They were anxious to please, loath to offend,
A loving couple they were and friends forever they will be.
Love's greatest gift - Remembrance.*

**Deeply missed & always remembered by
Family and Friends**

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SHUNG MU KERN
Age: 92

passed away peacefully on 11 February 2019.
Deeply missed and fondly remembered by loved ones.

Husband: Kah Luen Yin (Deceased)

Sons:
Kah Seng Kwei, Stanley
Kah Nan Kwee
Kah Fong Kuay

Daughters:
Kah Seow Chin
Kah You Zhen (Deceased)
Kah Lian Chin
Kah Luen Ching

Grandsons:
Daryl Kah Soon Tang
Kenneth Kah Luen Tong
Liau Hlaw Yuen
Liau Hlaw Chwun
Nicholas Yeow Teng Mun

Granddaughters:
Cheryl Kah Hui Man
Meryl Kah Hui Shan
Eileen Kah Yi Ling
Shirleen Kah Xue Lin
Yunice Kah Mei Ying
Vernice Kah Mei Lin
Doreen Liau Pei Fui
Doris Liau Pei Yia
Liau Pei Yie
Marilyn Yeow See Wai
Carilyn Yeow See Yeng

Great Grandson:
Cayhm Chan Tang Ze

Caregiver: Mistiani

And all relatives and friends.

Wake is held at Blk 725 Ang Mo Kio Ave 6, S'pore 560725 (Open field beside carpark).
Cortege will leave on Friday, 15 February 2019 at 11.20am for Mandai Crematorium Hall 3 for cremation at 12.20pm.

Daughters-in-law:
Pauline Low Choon Hwang
Alice Ang Swee Liang
Edwina Gwee Lwee Boey

Sons-in-law:

Denny Liau Tan Kee @
Liau Ken Hong
Yeow Whye Seng

Grandsons-in-law:

Harvey Chan Han Wey
Myron Tan Ting Yao

Great Granddaughters:
Caylie Chan Zi Xin
Cherish Tan Jia Yi

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want...
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."
Psalm 23



Tan Swee Lian @ Alea
Age: 95

Was called home to be with the Lord on 12 February 2019.
Deeply missed and fondly remembered by loved ones.

Husband: Chew Thuan Seng (deceased)

Children:
Nancy Chew
Harry Chew Hai Huat
Christina Chew Sam Moy
Rosalind Chew
Chew Hai Chwee

Grandchildren:
Jacinda Chew
Cheryl Chew
Kimberly Chew
Joyce Lim
Jonathan Lim
June Wang
Amanda Wang
Alvin Tay
Aloysius Tay
Felicia Tay

Great-Grandchildren:
Anderea Ang
Joel Ang
Jayden Lim
Isabella Mia Lee
Luke Goh
Tiffany Goh
Wan Khalifah Bin Wan Remy
Wan Nor Muhammad Bin Wan Remy
Asriel Tay
Isaac Tay
Mikayla Tay
Gabriela Tay

And all relatives and friends.

Wake is held at Singapore Casket Level 2, Regency Hall, 131 Lavender Street, Singapore 338737 from Wednesday 13 February 2019, 10.00am onwards.
Night service will be held on Friday 15 February 2019 at 8.00pm.
Cortege leaves on Saturday 16 February 2019 at 9.20am for Mandai Crematorium Hall 3 for cremation at 10.20am.

Spouses:
Lim Teng Wan
Annie Seah

Thomas Tay Jwee Hwa
Kim Gim Sim

Spouses:
Kevin Lee
Marlin Tazewell

Caregiver:
Dina Mabbalud Labang

Ang Kwang Wei
Janelle Thien
Jonathan Goh
Wan Remy Bin Ridzuan
Lim Li Hoon
Rita Lee Tay
Marvin Boey

Ang Kwang Wei
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With Deepest Sympathy & Heartfelt Condolences to
Vice President Sales (APJ) of CyberArk,
Mr Vincent Goh & family
on the demise of his beloved Father



GOH CHWEE OR
on 11 February 2019

From:

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SPORT



RIKAKO IKEE
JAPAN'S ASIAD
MVP STRUCK BY
LEUKAEMIA C8



Spurs players (from far left) Eric Dier, Christian Eriksen and Serge Aurier training before facing Dortmund in their last-16 first leg in the Champions League today. The club last won a trophy – the League Cup – 11 years ago. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

WE CAN BEAT ANYONE, INSISTS POCHETTINO

Spurs boss plays up Champions League hopes against Dortmund despite injuries to key players

LONDON • Mauricio Pochettino believes Tottenham can win the Champions League, despite injuries ruling key players like Harry Kane, Dele Alli and Danny Rose out of the last-16, first leg at Wembley today.

Speaking yesterday at a pre-match conference ahead of the clash against Borussia Dortmund, the manager said: "I really believe we can win every game we play, but we know this competition is so tough. We are facing a team at the top of the German table.

"But, with all respect to the team we're playing, we always believe we

can beat anyone.

"The players are giving their best and I am so proud to be in front of this group of players.

"If you are honest with yourself with what Tottenham are doing in the last few years, I think it's fantastic from the top to the bottom. Champions League for a third year in a row is a bonus.

"If we aren't ready to compete today, we have a problem. We'll find our energy to do our best."

Despite his optimism, the Argentinian is facing a defining moment in his Tottenham reign, as he tries to keep his bid for a first major prize in almost five years at the club alive after already exiting the FA Cup and the League Cup.

Spurs have never been past the last 16 of either the Champions League or the Europa League since

THE 12TH MAN

It definitely helps when the stadium is full and rocking. We want one of the best crowds in the world behind us.

JAN VERTONGHEN, Spurs defender, urging the fans to give the team a lift as they bid to improve on last season's showing.

the manager arrived from Southampton in May 2014.

There remains a nagging feeling of unfulfilled potential about the team, who have won only three Cups in the past 28 years. The last time they won a title was their League Cup triumph in 2008.

Tottenham have finished in the Premier League's top three for the past three seasons and are on track to finish third this term. But their poor record in domestic Cups under Pochettino is a significant blemish and their European exploits have been equally confounding.

His first season featured a tame Europa League last-32 defeat by Fiorentina and, the following year, they were outclassed by Dortmund in the last 16.

His maiden voyage in the Champions League was even more rocky,

as Tottenham failed to qualify from the group stage.

Finally hitting their stride last season, Spurs enjoyed a memorable 3-1 win over European champions Real Madrid in the group stage and they also beat Dortmund twice.

But, as the pressure mounted, Tottenham melted, blowing their lead in the last-16 second leg against Juventus as two second-half goals sent them crashing out.

Spurs defender Jan Vertonghen, who was also present at yesterday's press conference, has called for greater fan support at Wembley today if they are to progress further than the last 16 this campaign.

He said: "It definitely helps when the stadium is full and rocking. We want one of the best crowds in the world behind us."

Dortmund captain Marco Reus, meanwhile, has been ruled out of the clash with a thigh injury.

Reus, who has 17 goals for Dortmund in all competitions and is the club's leading scorer, injured his thigh during their German Cup defeat by Werder Bremen last week and missed their draw with Hoffenheim in the league at the weekend.

Jadon Sancho, the 18-year-old English winger who has eight goals and 10 assists in all competitions, is expected to take Reus' place in the starting line-up.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

TOTTENHAM V DORTMUND
Singtel TV Ch110 & StarHub Ch214, tomorrow, 3.55am

Real fledglings face off against Ajax's talented young guns

AMSTERDAM • Real Madrid against Ajax would typically be a clash of stars against prodigies but, when they face each other in the first leg of the Champions League last-16 tie today, the difference will be harder to distinguish.

Ajax will parade their latest crop of young gems at the Johan Cruyff Arena, where Frenkie de Jong and Matthijs de Ligt will attempt to live up to already-swelling reputations while the likes of Donny van de Beek, Andre Onana and Kasper Dolberg could also enhance theirs.

For Real, Gareth Bale aside, the Galacticos are gone and are replaced by a handful of prospects trying to forge their way through.

Real coach Santiago Solari, whose predecessors Zinedine Zidane and Julen Lopetegui both used young

players only when they had to, has made youth his first choice since being tasked with rejuvenating his team in November.

Vinicius Junior has had less playing time than Ajax's de Jong, with only six starts in LaLiga and one in the Champions League, but the Brazilian's impact has been arguably just as dramatic as the Dutchman.

Signed last summer for €45 million (\$69 million), Vinicius was supposed to spend his debut season settling in with the reserve side, a strategy adhered to perhaps too rigidly by Lopetegui.

Solari, in charge of Real Madrid B at the time, was the coach that received him, witnessing first-hand as the 18-year-old scored twice against Atletico B, curled in a free-

kick against Unionistas and equalised against Celta Vigo B.

Vinicius was raw but, when Lopetegui was sacked, Solari had greater legitimacy to promote him.

He had faith too. Solari gave Vinicius 90 minutes in his first match in charge, more than Lopetegui had in all 14 of his.

Almost four months on, Vinicius has 22 appearances for the first team, the latest pair against Barcelona at the Nou Camp and Atletico Madrid at the Wanda Metropolitano. In both, he was Real's greatest threat, to the extent that even Bale's starting spot has been questioned.

"His adaptation has been very fast," Solari said. "He is 18 and he has adapted to a new country, a new culture, a different type of foot-

ball. He has shown his talent, but we have to take care of him."

Vinicius is the poster boy of Solari's meritocracy, an approach that puts reputation far below humility and hard work.

Among the other fresh faces to come in are Spaniard Sergio Reguilon at left-back, Marcos Llorente in defensive midfield, and midfielder Dani Ceballos. Together, Vinicius, Reguilon, Llorente and Ceballos have played 64 games since Solari was appointed.

"They are the future of Real Madrid," Solari said. "Therefore, they have to be part of the present."

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

AJAX V REAL MADRID
Singtel TV Ch112 & StarHub Ch213, tomorrow, 3.55am



Real Madrid's 18-year-old Brazilian striker Vinicius Junior is the poster boy of coach Santiago Solari's meritocracy, an approach that puts reputation far below humility and hard work. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

THE STRAITS TIMES YOUNG ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

PRESENTED BY 100 PLUS



From far left: High jumper Kampton Kam, hockey player Sean See and floorballer John Alicante Embile are among five nominees for The Straits Times' Young Athlete of the Year award.
ST PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO, MATTHIAS CHONG, KHALID BABA

stead of training so hard," said the 16-year-old who plays for the Singapore Khalsa Association team.

The former St Andrew's Secondary hockey captain has been nominated for his act of sportsmanship in the Schools National B Division boys' bronze-medal match.

When play resumed after Northland Secondary's Muhammad Raihan Adris sprained his ankle, the Saints threw the ball to the other side of the pitch for Northland to start. But miscommunication saw one of the Saints forwards taking the ball and scoring to put his team 2-1 up.

After a discussion with his coach, Sean requested the umpire to rule out the goal. The game ended 1-1 and, in the penalty shoot-out, Northland won 4-3.

Sean was surprised by his nomination, and said of his act: "I thought it was nothing."

Another person who was surprised by his nomination is former Bukit Merah Secondary floorballer John Alicante Embile.

"I didn't expect to be recognised. Through this, I'm more motivated to break barriers," said the 17-year-old, who scored the only successful penalty in a shoot-out in the Schools National B Division final against Catholic High School.

John, who had never taken a penalty before, hopes his story can inspire other athletes to achieve their goals.

"I hope it can bring out the fire in every athlete out there, especially those who doubt themselves," he said.

"Taking big steps towards your passion requires courage and I hope this serves as their fuel to successfully reach their goals."

The other nominees are Queensway Secondary footballer Putri Nur Syaliza and the Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road) C Division table tennis team.

claura@sph.com.sg

They all have compelling tales

Trio are worthy nominees for Straits Times' Young Athlete award

Laura Chia

Despite battling a high fever and back injury, high jumper Kampton Kam insisted on competing in the Schools National A Division athletics championships last March.

The Victoria Junior College student said: "I wanted to fight for my school and I didn't want to let my ailments affect me. Regardless of the result, I wanted to compete and know that I did my best."

His tenacity paid off as he not only won the title but also set a personal best (PB) of 2.02m (from 1.96m). A week later, still ill, he struck gold at the South-east Asia Youth Athletics Championships in Bangkok.

The 17-year-old set two more PBs - 2.03m in June and 2.05m in July - before claiming the gold at July's Asean School Games (ASG) in

Kuala Lumpur where he set a national Under-18 and U-20 record of 2.10m.

His achievements have earned Kampton, who also finished seventh at the Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires in October, a shot at The Straits Times' Young Athlete of the Year award.

He said the nomination has inspired him to do better in the National School Games (NSG) and other competitions, including the Asian Athletics Championships in Doha in April and July's ASG in Semarang, Indonesia, where he hopes to break the Games record of 2.13m set by Malaysia's Nauraj Singh Randhawa in 2010.

While Kampton has high hopes, fellow nominee and hockey player Sean See prefers a more relaxed approach.

"Hockey is more of a leisure activity for me. I want to play it for fun in-

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Kampton Kam
High Jump

ACS (Barker Road)*
Table Tennis

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Winners are ready to blaze any trail.
Ready to give it all you've got.
In that moment when you think you can't,
you discover you can.
You did. And you will again.

*Back row : Ethan Chua, Ryan Tan and Seth Wong
Front row : Ryan Chong, Silas Chua, Ethan Ong, Ryan Eng and Benjamin Wee

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SPORT



Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka was coached by Sascha Bajin in her back-to-back Grand Slam wins in New York and Melbourne. PHOTOS: REUTERS, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

OSAKA IN SHOCK SPLIT WITH COACH BAJIN

World No. 1 to go separate ways with German who coached her to consecutive Grand Slams

TOKYO • Naomi Osaka shocked the tennis world on Monday after she announced she was splitting with her German coach Sascha Bajin,

abruptly ending one of the most successful recent partnerships in women's tennis. The surprising news came just 16

days after Osaka won the Australian Open, her second Grand Slam title under Bajin's watch following last year's US Open triumph. The win in Melbourne vaulted the Japanese to the world No. 1 ranking, a first for an Asian male or female singles player. "Hey everyone, I will no longer be

working together with Sascha. I thank him for his work and wish him all the best in the future," the 21-year-old wrote on Twitter. Bajin, who became a coach after serving as the long-time hitting partner of Serena Williams, was named the WTA's Coach of the Year in 2018. He responded on Twit-

ter to Osaka's announcement. "Thank you Naomi," Bajin wrote. "I wish you nothing but the best as well. What a ride that was. Thank you for letting me be part of this." The reasons for the split were unclear. Bajin did not respond to messages seeking comment, and Osaka's agent Stuart Duguid declined to comment. The Japanese media, however, cited Osaka's management company IMG in reporting that there had been a breakdown in the player's relationship with the coach since the start of the year. According to Japan's Nikkan Sports, some practice sessions with Bajin at the Australian Open lasted just 10 minutes and she sometimes hit without him present. Osaka, who is scheduled to compete in Dubai next week, reportedly

began sounding out potential replacements late last year. American tennis legend Lindsay Davenport told The Tennis Channel: "It's a shocker... They started working together in December of 2017 and it's just been nothing but improvement for Osaka. That is really surprising." The split is the latest on a coaches' carousel in which success has not guaranteed longevity in player-coach partnerships. The 2018 French Open champion Simona Halep and Wimbledon champion Angelique Kerber both parted with their coaches after those victories, meaning that the reigning champions of the past four Grand Slam events are no longer with the coaches who helped them to those titles. NYT/IMAGES, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Next 24 Hours

TODAY

BASKETBALL

ABL HK Eastern v Alab Pilipinas (StarHub Ch202, 8pm).

FOOTBALL

Uefa Champions League Last 16, 1st leg: Tottenham v Dortmund (Singtel TV Ch110 & StarHub Ch214), Ajax v Real Madrid (Ch112 & Ch213) – tomorrow, 3.55am.

TENNIS

ATP Rotterdam Open Day 3: Session 1 (6pm) & 2 (tomorrow, 2.30am) – StarHub Ch201.

For latest updates, go to singtelstv.com.sg & starhubgo.com or check the on-screen TV guide.

Olympic hope Ikee vows to beat leukaemia

TOKYO • Japanese swim queen Rikako Ikee, the poster girl for next year's Tokyo Olympics, has been diagnosed with leukaemia, the 18-year-old tweeted yesterday. In a shock announcement, she said: "After feeling unwell, I returned in haste from Australia and following tests I was diagnosed with leukaemia. I still can't believe it myself, I'm in a state of confusion." Ikee shot to fame at last year's Asian Games, where she captured a record six golds and two silvers to fire a warning for the 2020 Olympics in her home city. The teenager has been tipped to push for gold on several fronts, in particular in the 100 metres butterfly.

She told fans she was determined to beat her illness after being forced to abandon her training camp on Australia's Gold Coast. "If treated properly, it's a disease that can be beaten," said Ikee, who confirmed she will withdraw from the Japanese championships in April and is also in doubt for the world championships in Gwangju, South Korea in July. "I will devote myself to my treatment and strive to be able to show an even stronger Rikako Ikee." Her coach Jiro Miki admitted that he had never seen the swimmer struggle as much as she had while training in Australia. "We took her to a local hospital to check her blood and heart, but de-

cided to return to Japan as quickly as possible to undergo further tests," he said. "But, as for her motivation to beat this disease, I can only bow my head at her determination." He added that the "possibility was not zero" for Ikee to still have a chance of competing in Tokyo. After her breakout performance at the Asian Games, Ikee said she welcomed the pressure to produce on the world stage next year. Japanese swim officials were left stunned by the news. "I could never imagine Ikee could suffer an illness like this," said Japan Swimming Federation vice-president Koji Ueno. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS



Rikako Ikee is Japan's poster girl for next year's Tokyo Olympics.

SportsWorld

Coaching instructor leaves FAS

The Football Association of Singapore (FAS) announced yesterday that coaching instructor Vincent Subramaniam has left the national body following the expiry of his contract. The 64-year-old said: "I thank the FAS for this opportunity to oversee the youth coaches and coaching development, and am glad to have assisted in this period." The former national coach played a key role in the Continuous Coach Education sessions for the youth coaches to ensure that elite youth development is aligned with the FAS' youth development philosophy.

Ex-England goalie Banks dies at 81

LONDON • Gordon Banks, England's goalkeeper when they won the 1966 football World Cup, has died aged 81, his former club Stoke City announced yesterday. Banks, who played in every game of the 1966 campaign on home soil, is probably best known for a wonder save he produced to deny Brazilian great Pele in the 1970 World Cup. His family said Banks, who lost an eye in a car crash in 1972, died overnight in his sleep. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

5th Pebble Beach for Mickelson

LOS ANGELES • Phil Mickelson captured his 50th career worldwide title on Monday, finishing off the last two holes of his darkness-halted final round to win the US PGA Pebble Beach Pro-Am tournament for a fifth time. The 48-year-old American golfer, a five-time Major champion, closed with a six-foot birdie putt at the par-five 18th hole to complete a bogey-free final round of seven-under 65 and conclude 72 holes on 19-under 268. He defeated England's Paul Casey (71) by three strokes to be the tournament's oldest winner. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

SPORTS FIXTURES HIGHLIGHTS				
Event	Home	Away	Timing	Venue
Thu, 14 Feb 2019				
French League	St Etienne	Strasbourg	2.00am	LW*
UE Champions	Ajax	Real Madrid	4.00am	LW*
UE Champions	Tottenham	Dortmund	4.00am	LW*

LW* : Telecast not available at Livewire(Singapore Pools)
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TOTO

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Bowled over by their awards

A photograph of two men, Muhammad Jaris Goh and Joey Yeo, standing together and smiling. They are both holding trophies. The background features a large red Chinese dragon decoration.

Muhammad Jaris Goh and Joey Yeo were respectively named Bowler of the Year and Youth Bowler of the Year at the Singapore Bowling Chinese New Year cum Awards Celebration Dinner at Peach Garden (OCBC Centre) yesterday. Goh, 24, was part of the men's trios and team who won bronze at the Asian Games and World Championships respectively last year, while Yeo, 21, was part of the women's trio who claimed bronze at the Asian Games. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

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Can e-sports level up?

Challenges include getting financial help for full-time players and integrating the sport into the culture and lifestyle of Singaporeans



Team Flash's FIFA Online team includes (clockwise from far left, seated) Amraan Gani, Joseph Yeo, Fardeen Hussain and Shabbeer Ahmad. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



Lester Wong

With e-sports set to debut at the Southeast Asian Games in November, winning gold medals for Singapore by being good at playing video games is now a real possibility for gamers here.

The inevitable next question, one which the local e-sports fraternity has been grappling with for some time, is how to produce gamers of regional calibre on a consistent basis.

It is no easy task. Gone are the days when talented amateurs stood a fighting chance on the world or regional stages. E-sports today, like traditional sports, requires a full-time commitment just to be competitive, which, in turn, requires an ecosystem capable of sustaining full-time players.

The interest in e-sports is rising in Singapore, but the local scene is seen to be lagging behind those in the United States, Europe and neighbouring countries Thailand and Indonesia. And drawing a full-time salary is the exception rather than the norm for e-sports players here.

"There is a lot of talent in Singapore," said Mr Jay Soh, founder and chief executive officer of local e-sports organisation Resurgence, which has 12 teams over nine games on its roster.

"We have seen that from Scythe (third in the world at the 2011 Dota 2 International) and Singapore Sentinels (second in Asia for League Of Legends from 2012 to 2013). But there are also a lot of uniquely Singaporean challenges. We have a small market here and, culturally, there is still a lot of opposition to, and ignorance about, e-sports as a career."

Dota 2 and League Of Legends are both five-on-five multiplayer online battle arena (Moba) games. The exploits of local teams Scythe and Singapore Sentinels captured the imagination of the local gaming community in the early days of organised e-sports. But their members have long since dispersed and their results not matched in the years since.

Today, there is little doubt that e-sports, as a global commercial phenomenon, has arrived.

It has nearly 400 million fans and the value of the global e-sports industry is expected to cross the US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion) threshold this year.

"There's a lot more interest in the space from sponsors and more opportunities to monetise in the form of media rights and merchandising," said Singapore Cybergames and Online Gaming Association (Scoga) chairman Nicholas Khoo.

"The traditional thinking is that guys who invest in a sports team are not in it for the money and that used to be true for e-sports too, but now the money can be significant."

Singtel staged its first e-sports tournament last year, with the telco pouring US\$300,000 into the prize pool for the PVP eSports Championship.

Local stalwart Impunity, a home-grown e-sports organisation that has been around since 2010, also epitomised the trend when Singapore-based sports and entertainment firm Orientivity bought it last June. The company is also the regional partner of Bundesliga

Going regional to secure talent

For home-grown e-sports organisation Team Flash, the goal is not only to groom players of regional calibre, but also to stand on the regional stage. This means not limiting itself to taking on local teams or players, said Flash's chief executive officer Terence Ting.

Flash moved into Vietnam in February last year and its Vietnamese Arena Of Valor team won a bronze at the Asian Games in Indonesia in August, where e-sports was a demonstration event. Arena Of Valor is a five-on-five multiplayer online battle arena game.

The organisation has 13 players in Vietnam and 11 in Singapore on its roster across five games.

"Singaporean gamers, if they are good, will always want to go overseas to play because there are just not enough tournaments locally (to sustain their careers)," said Mr Ting, who founded Flash in 2017.

"It's the same for us. We are a regional organisation because there are 300 million gamers in South-east Asia and we want to host multiple teams across multiple markets.

"As we grow, we will also be able to send Singaporean talent to overseas teams."

The multi-game, multi-team structure of e-sports organisations such as Flash can be unfamiliar to those more used to sports teams, where everyone plays the same game.

But the sheer number of game titles played competitively worldwide and how quickly a new game can become popular and lucrative, necessitate diversification.

Flash garnered considerable mainstream attention in April last year when its three-man team for the multiplayer football game FIFA Online won the East Asian Champions Cup (EACC) Spring and US\$108,000 (S\$147,000) in prize money.

The team successfully defended its title at the EACC Winter tournament in November, picking up another US\$100,000 in winnings.

Despite some measure of success, Mr Ting said e-sports remains very much a long-term play.

"We are seeing a drive towards monetisation globally and sponsors are more receptive now, but I think it will be another two to three years before we can say whether e-sports can be sustainable," he said. "Singapore is still very challenging, but we are doing the best we can."

football club Borussia Dortmund.

"We invest into a few other local entertainment properties, and e-sports is another strategic direction for us," said Orientivity managing director Zheng Le.

"Media rights are something largely untapped so far and with increased success and exposure, we're confident sponsors will pay for it."

GREAT POTENTIAL, BUT NO GUARANTEE OF SUCCESS
continued on D2

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Playing to spark a resurgence

Resurgence's name is also the organisation's mission: It wants to provide the second wind for the flagging local e-sports scene.

The two-year-old entity's strategy has thus been to invest broadly in Singaporean e-sports, with 12 teams over nine games on its roster.

It is an expensive strategy that may not net a return for some years, if at all. But Resurgence founder and chief executive officer Jayf Soh believes the outlay is worth it.

"When I was starting the team, people asked me why I wanted to be based in Singapore, with its small market and high costs," said Mr Soh, whose involvement in e-sports stems from his days as a caster (commentator) in multi-player online battle arena game Heroes Of The Storm competitions.

"And yes, if Resurgence was a full-fledged business, it'd have made sense to go for emerging markets in the region.

"But I'm a Singaporean, my heart is here and I wanted to help plug the gaps in Singapore e-sports. The most obvious gap then and now is the support for players."

He said the lack of support is the main reason Singapore has fallen behind its South-east Asian neigh-

bours in e-sports. No local team emerged from the South-east Asian qualifiers for any of the six games featured at the Asian Games in Indonesia in August.

"We're giving players basic support. We manage them on tight training routines, give them a place to train and structured contracts with incentive clauses," said Mr Soh. "The money is not enough to be called a salary, but it's enough so that they don't have to worry about working part-time to support themselves. What I'm doing is not new in the world, but (I'm the one) doing it in Singapore."

The stability afforded by Resurgence to its 45 players is bearing fruit. It recorded 17 championship wins and 36 podium finishes last year.

Resurgence plans to expand its roster this year to include four more titles.

"We may not be able to sign every-one, but my guarantee to players is that we will be on the lookout for you if you are the best," said Mr Soh.

"At the same time, we want to implore more organisations to step up and support promising local players."

Lester Wong



E-sports group Resurgence's League Of Legends team members (from front to back) Kenneth Goh, Timothy Lim, Wayne Aw, Chen Yi Hui, Alex Tan, Owyang Jian Hao and Leonard Loh. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Great potential, but no guarantee of success

FROM D1

But there are degrees of untapped markets and the Singapore market is more untapped than most.

The world's top players earn eye-popping sums for their hard work – Singapore's most successful professional Daryl "Iceiceice" Koh, 28, has amassed more than US\$1 million in tournament prize winnings alone.

Only an elite few reach such heights, however. Local teams' financial returns – and their ability to pay players – are limited by Singapore's small population and market.

Resurgence, Flash and Impunity are the only home-grown organisations that pay some kind of monthly wage to their players.

Flash's chief executive officer Terence Ting said: "I would say the (local) ecosystem is not stable enough to warrant too many full-time players. And in any talent-based industry, there is always an attrition rate.

"For young gamers with passion, my honest advice is to enter the scene gradually. Don't just quit school because you will be investing so much into something with potentially little to no return."

Of Flash's four local Fifa Online players, Mr Joseph "Zarate" Yeo is the only one on a full-time salary, which Mr Ting said was comparable with that of a fresh graduate today.

Mr Soh said what Resurgence pays its players is "above market

rate", but would approach a graduate-level salary only with tournament winnings included. This can put off aspiring e-sports professionals and their parents alike, he added.

"In Vietnam and Thailand, I would even go so far as to say that parents would prefer to send their kids to cyber cafes instead of school, but the cost of living here is so much higher," he said.

"We are honest with parents. It's important for them to realise e-sports' potential, but also know that there's really no guarantee of success."

There is no consensus among the three established organisations here on the best way to navigate these challenges, with each charting its own course.

But all of them agreed that the key to a sustainable e-sports ecosystem lies in changing mindsets and building e-sports into the culture and lifestyle of Singaporeans.

Mr Zheng said: "For local competitions, four-figure prize pools are already considered large. It's a few hundred dollars most of the time.

"Relying on competitions alone is not sustainable. That's why we need the casual gamers, the grass-roots community.

"You don't have to be super good at e-sports. You just have to be in the audience, feeling the atmosphere. This is how the whole ecosystem develops."

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Aiming to bring expertise, technical knowledge to Singapore scene



E-sports organisation Impunity's Vainglory team during a practice session. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

The history of Impunity neatly encapsulates the old and new realities of the e-sports industry.

Formed in 2010, Impunity has a genesis typical of that era: A group of friends and like-minded individuals coming together to forge their own path in the brave new world of e-sports.

The organisation's tagline proudly emblazoned on its website – "Coolest Esports Team in Singapore" – harks back to a more innocent age.

It was also what drew current owners Orientivity to buy over the team in June last year, ushering Impunity into the new age of increased investment and professionalisation.

Orientivity managing director Zheng Le said: "We liked the culture. It was very clean, not toxic at

all. The team was not bonded by money."

Orientivity, a sports and entertainment company based in Singapore, also has ties with Bundesliga club Borussia Dortmund and the Chinese Super League.

It helps that Impunity's flagship Vainglory (a five-on-five mobile game) team has consistently delivered results.

The team finished fourth at the Vainglory World Championships held in Singapore in December 2017 and second in the World Electronic Sports Games (WESG) organised by Alibaba sports arm Alisports last year.

Led by captain Amos "Quater-vois" Ker, the team is headed to Chongqing next month for the 2019 WESG, after winning the Singapore and South-east Asian qualifiers.

Impunity has five teams on its roster, including a Counterstrike: Go team from Myanmar.

Orientivity is betting on Impunity's continued success in its bid to boost the local e-sports ecosystem.

"The biggest problem with e-sports is its sustainability. Singapore currently does not have the capacity to run big e-sports events on a regular basis," said Mr Zheng.

"We want to bring that expertise and technical knowledge involved in running international-level events to Singapore. That will create new jobs and opportunities in the industry.

"And that starts with getting our name out by achieving results regionally."

Lester Wong

PC

Better performance, battery life with new chip

Vincent Chang

The Surface Laptop is Microsoft's take on the Apple MacBook Air.

Its design is as clean as the MacBook Air's, with a reflective Windows logo as the only embellishment on the lid.

The second iteration, simply dubbed the Surface Laptop 2, made its local debut last month.

Its design is identical to that of its predecessor, which was launched here last year. Both versions are handy to carry around, with a slim and sturdy unibody aluminium chassis that weighs about 1.3kg. You will not be able to tell the platinum models apart.

The Surface Laptop 2 also comes in a new matte black colour option. However, this black version is currently unavailable here.

Unfortunately, the Surface Laptop 2 has the same limited number of ports as the previous model. There is a single full-size USB Type-A port, a mini DisplayPort and Microsoft's proprietary Surface Connect port that, in addition to charging the notebook, can connect

to the optional Surface Dock (\$314) to expand the laptop's connectivity options. There is no microSD card slot, unlike the Surface Pro tablet.

There are no USB-C or Thunderbolt 3 ports, both of which are increasingly standard issue on premium laptops. This is disappointing as Microsoft's smaller and more affordable Surface Go tablet has embraced change with a USB-C port.

The Surface Dock, too, lacks any of the newer interfaces. This means a dongle is needed to connect the latest USB-C smartphone to the Surface Laptop.

The biggest upgrade in the Surface Laptop 2 is under the hood. It uses Intel's latest eighth-generation processor, which is a more significant upgrade than one might think – because Intel has doubled the number of processor cores in its latest chips.

The mid-tier Core i5-8250U processor in my review set has four cores, up from two in the Core i5-7200U chip used by the previous Surface Laptop.

But there is a catch – the four cores on the new chip run at a much



lower base clock speed (1.8GHz) than the older model (2.5GHz). So the performance boost from the processor upgrade will vary, depending on whether the application can take advantage of the extra cores.

The other departure from the previous version is that it now comes preloaded with Windows 10 Home instead of the locked-down Windows 10 S variant that can only run apps from the curated Windows Store. It is a change for the better and, perhaps, a sign that Microsoft is listening to consumers.

For a typical laptop user, the best thing about the Surface Laptop 2 is how impressively quiet and cool it

runs. I felt only a slight warmth on my lap while using it to edit documents and browse the Internet. It operates so quietly that you would think it does not have a cooling fan.

The rest of its features are unchanged from the previous model.

It has the same high-resolution 13.5-inch touch display that is optimised for productivity, thanks to a 3:2 aspect ratio that lets you view a lengthy document or Web page with less scrolling. An infrared camera above the display lets the laptop identify and log in users based on facial features.

The screen works with the

optional Surface Pen (\$148), though its usefulness is limited as the screen cannot be opened 180-degree flat.

Its keyboard is covered by Alcantara fabric, a suede-like material found in luxury vehicles. It looks and feels nice, though I would take extra care not to spill coffee or tea on it. The keys offer good travel, but they feel mushy. The middle of the keyboard also flexes a bit too much during typing for my liking.

Battery life is excellent, with the laptop lasting 10 minutes shy of eight hours in the video-loop battery test, which has the screen brightness set to maximum. It

improves on the battery uptime of the previous model by almost two hours.

However, it does appear slightly more expensive than the previous version. My Core i5 review set costs \$1,898, compared with \$1,788 previously. Both versions sport identical specifications except for the processor.

• **Verdict:** A processor upgrade keeps Microsoft's clamshell laptop snappy and improves its battery life. But Microsoft missed an opportunity by not introducing USB-C or Thunderbolt 3 ports.

SPECS	RATING
PRICE: \$1,898	FEATURES: 4/5
PROCESSOR: Intel Core i5-8250U (1.6GHz)	DESIGN: 4/5
GRAPHICS: Intel UHD Graphics 620	PERFORMANCE: 4/5
RAM: 8GB DDR3	VALUE FOR MONEY: 3/5
SCREEN SIZE: 13.5 inches, 2,256 x 1,504 pixels	BATTERY LIFE: 5/5
CONNECTIVITY: 1 x USB 3.0, mini-DisplayPort, Surface Connect port, audio jack	OVERALL: 4/5
BATTERY: 45 watt-hour	

Gaming

Fun, fitting closure to old story



Kingdom Hearts 3 wraps up the plot of a tale that began in 2002, with a dynamic combat system and new abilities for characters

Hariz Baharudin

Fans of Kingdom Hearts – the Disney and Square Enix crossover series of action role-playing games – have been waiting nearly 13 years for the release of the series’ third main entry, which is now out on Xbox One and PlayStation 4.

I am one of these fans and I will admit it did feel surreal to start the game and see the Kingdom Hearts 3 (KH3) title screen, hear the familiar sounds and know that a story which began in 2002 would finally be wrapping up.

Fans can be assured that they will find the answers they have been waiting for, though the same cannot be said for newcomers.

This is because of the sheer number of backstories that pre-

ceded this latest instalment.

It would be impossible to accurately recap the entire plot of Kingdom Hearts, given that in addition to the two other main titles, there are more than five other spin-offs across multiple gaming platforms.

The game tries to do so in a series of cut-scenes to summarise the story so far. However, a lot of the emotional nuances are lost and, thus, several events of the game, especially the climax, could feel less impactful for those new to the series.

KH3 stars spiky-haired protagonist Sora and Disney icons Donald Duck and Goofy, as they visit different Disney worlds to defeat a range of enemies commanded by an evil mastermind named Xehanort.

Employing a common video game trope, Sora starts off losing all the powers he had and has to go on a quest to regain them. This allows the game to immediately launch into action.

Previous games were criticised for taking too long to get going, but KH3 quickly throws players into the thick of action in Hercules’ world of Olympus.

What follows is a tour of some of modern Disney’s iconic worlds, like Tangled’s world of Corona and Frozen’s world of Arendelle.

One of the best parts of Kingdom Hearts has always been the opportunity to explore these lands and, this time, players can even enter the world of some Pixar animation studio movies, like Toy Story and Monsters Inc.

But it is a pity that some of the worlds feel lifeless and undeveloped. Corona, for instance, boasts beautifully rendered forests that are beautiful but empty, save for the enemies to fight.

It is a good thing then that the combat system is fun and dynamic. Players control Sora who attacks with his Keyblade weapon and the game allows you to equip the character with up to three different Keyblades.

Each Keyblade is able to transform into different weapons, sometimes more than once, and it is here that Kingdom Hearts really flexes its creative muscles. Other than the typical weapons like guns or a spear, Sora is also able to wield a pair of yo-yos, ice skates and even a pirate flag

SPECS
PRICE: From \$74.90 (PS4, version tested; and Xbox One)
GENRE: Action role-playing game
RATING: 8/10

and his party attack with spinning tea cups or a roller coaster.

The fast pace of the action does not, however, translate into a cogent plot. KH3 is hampered by an inconsistent pace, starting fast and leaving players having to plough through a draggy middle section before ramping it up again towards the end.

Thankfully, the game’s ending does give a sense of closure to not just the game’s roughly 30-hour campaign, but also to the story that started in 2002.

Perhaps I am feeling this way because I am a long-time fan. But the ending is a fitting one that does justice to its characters, while leaving Kingdom Hearts open to new stories in future.

Let’s hope that it will not take Disney and Square Enix another 13 years to do so.

● **Verdict: A creative and exciting battle system holds Kingdom Hearts 3 together, delivering a satisfying closure to a story more than 15 years in the making.**

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SPECS
PRICE: From \$79.90 (PS4, version tested; PC, Xbox One)
GENRE: Air combat
RATING: 8/10

Sky’s the limit for air battles

Trevor Tan

My childhood dream was to be a fighter pilot, but myopia dashed my hopes.

Ever since, I have sought solace in air combat video games such as Falcon 4.0 and the long-running Ace Combat series.

The latter’s last major release was in 2007, with Ace Combat 6: Fires Of Liberation. After 12 years, Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown (AC7) has finally been released.

Despite having played several iterations, I am still confused by the series’ storyline and the similar-sounding fictional nation names such as Osean and Erusean.

In AC7, you play as an Osean ace pilot, with a Trigger called Sign, as war breaks out between Osean and Erusean.

The game is newbie-friendly. Even if you have not played the previous games, you will be able to get up to speed with the well-designed single-player campaign.

Before each mission, you choose the aircraft and a special weapon apart from the standard auto-cannon and air-to-air missiles. With each successful mission, you get credits to buy new aircraft and weapons as well as unlock new upgrades.

You will need a variety of aircraft – from the versatile F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter to the iconic F-4 Phantom bomber – as well as different missiles to help you in your missions.

The missions come in different varieties. There are bombing runs, escort missions, challenges that involve plenty of dogfighting and more.

If you are looking for a realistic flight simulator like the Falcon 4.0, you will be disappointed. The Ace Combat series has always used more forgiving arcade-like controls.

You can choose standard or expert control, depending on your experience level. With expert control, turning is performed via roll and pitch adjustments, instead of merely moving the left stick of the PlayStation 4 console controller (for the PS4 game version).

Or you can get the Thrustmaster Flight Hotas 4 Ace Combat 7 Limited Edition joystick and thrust control. This peripheral makes you feel like a fighter pilot. However, I find using the console controller to be easier, as it takes time to get familiar with the different buttons on the joystick and thrust control.

Regardless, it is not easy to pilot these supersonic jets.

There is a steep learning curve for newbies and veterans alike. This game is not easy, even in the lowest difficulty setting – be prepared to be shot down and to crash a lot.

The chatter among squadmates helps to liven the mood, as you move from points A to B to finish your objectives. And all the voice actors have done a superb job – it really feels like losing a real squadmate when one of them dies.

The missions are really tough. This is further exacerbated by the lack of waypoint saves. Sometimes, I had to replay the entire mission because I missed the objective just by a few seconds.

A nice bonus for local gamers is a city called Sierraplata, which is modelled after Singapore, in one of the campaign missions.

Apart from a re-designed Marina Bay Sands, the other buildings around the Marina Bay area are faithfully re-created in the game’s version.

Unfortunately, you will be too busy trying to gun down your enemies to notice the superb graphics, textures and details of the game world and aircraft.

The lighting and sound effects are also stunning and realistic.

After you are done with the campaign, you can move to the multiplayer mode where you can participate in team deathmatch – in groups of two to four players – or an eight-player free-for-all.

Of course, there is a virtual reality (VR) mode that takes advantage of the PlayStation VR headset.

I do not have the headset to test the VR mode. But with only three VR missions available, I doubt I am missing much.

● **Verdict: For those who love to fly fighter jets and take part in intense dogfighting, Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown is the game to get.**



SPECS
PRICE: Free (PC, version tested; PS4, Xbox One)
GENRE: Battle royale, online shooter
RATING: 9/10

Legendary game in the making

Vincent Chang

There is a new challenger in the popular battle royale game genre.

Launched with little fanfare last week, Apex Legends has already sent records tumbling, registering 10 million players in just three days.

This same milestone took battle royale phenomenon Fortnite two weeks to achieve. Apex Legends, though, still has a long way to rival Fortnite’s accumulative player base of more than 200 million.

Apex Legends has the usual trappings of the genre, from having players drop down onto a small island to restricting the playable area as the game progresses to force confrontations among players.

What sets it apart is the focus on squad play. Teams of three players fight to be the last team standing out of 20 squads. While team-based modes are available in many battle royale games, they are usually more of an afterthought.

For starters, dying in Apex Legends is not the end of the game. A badly injured player can be revived by a teammate. Even a dead player can be brought back if his remains are recovered in 90 seconds and brought to a re-spawn station.

This mechanic makes things interesting – an enemy squad may lurk in the vicinity of a fallen player in anticipation of his teammate coming to his rescue – leading to heated and desperate confrontations.

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TECH
EDITOR’S CHOICE

tance to warn teammates. Ping a location on the map to suggest the team head to that area.

At launch, Apex Legends feels polished with the production value of a paid game. The interface looks sleek while visual elements are calibrated to be accessible to gamers, such as using colours to denote tiers of loot and types of ammunition.

This is not always the case for the genre, which often sees games released in beta or incomplete form.

It has a good selection of weapons that all feel suitably different. They are drawn from developer Respawn Entertainment’s Titanfall series of first-person shooting games.

Apex Legends is set in the same universe as Titanfall, though it does not have Titanfall’s giant robots.

My grouse so far is that it currently has only a level to play in, which may get stale if players binge on the game, like I did over the past week.

Like other battle royale games, the business model for the free-to-play Apex Legends is through microtransactions.

While you can play without paying a cent, it takes a while to grind enough in-game currency to unlock the two characters not available at the start. Items available in the game store are cosmetic in nature and do not confer any in-game advantage.

● **Verdict: Apex Legends may borrow from other games, but its polished, team-based gameplay makes it a blast to play.**

Phones

Sleek V40 is a solid performer

LG's smartphone has five cameras that produce pleasant photos and come with camera tricks

Vincent Chang

You would be forgiven for overlooking LG's V40 ThinQ, the South Korean firm's answer to the Samsung Note series. The V40's cause was not helped by a poorly timed release date. It debuted in early October last year, shortly before the Google Pixel 3 was announced and about a week after the latest Apple iPhone reached the hands of consumers.

Thus, even the novelty of being the first smartphone to sport five cameras – three at the back and two at the front – was quickly drowned out by the hype of competing devices.

Furthermore, even if you had been paying attention, you would not have been able to buy the V40 here last year. It became available in Singapore only at the end of last month.

These issues aside, the V40 is a very good phone.

For starters, its Oled screen is excellent with lively colours and sufficient brightness to use outdoors under the sun. It is a 1,440p screen that offers more pixels than the more common 1,080p version.

Like premium flagship phones from Huawei and Samsung, the V40 supports high-dynamic range (HDR) videos from streaming services like YouTube and Netflix.

The display has the screen notch favoured by most phones last year. It can be hidden by enabling a setting.

This notch and the phone's conventional design – rounded corners and a glass back – make the V40 rather difficult to pick out from a line-up of last year's smartphones.

To my surprise, the V40 is light for an all-glass smartphone. The matt glass back on my Carmine Red review set is also pleasingly resistant to fingerprint smudges. But it is slippery – perhaps more so than some other phones.

Samsung's recent flagship devices have a dedicated hardware button to activate the company's Bixby virtual assistant. The V40 boasts a similar feature, though in its case, it summons the Google Assistant which, in my book, is more helpful than Bixby.

The V40 has all the features of a flagship smartphone, such as wireless charging and IP68 certification for water- and dust-resistance. In addition, it retains its predecessor's 3.5mm audio jack and the 32-bit quad digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) for good quality audio.

Of course, its headline feature is its five cameras.

The three-camera unit at the back consists of a primary 12-megapixel (MP) camera supplemented by a telephoto lens camera and a wide-angle lens camera.

You can switch easily among

these three cameras in the app by tapping an icon. If you cannot decide, a rather gimmicky Triple Shot feature shoots the same scene using all three cameras one after another. The app then stitches the three images together to create a short video.

The camera app has a couple of other tricks. Cine Shot is a twist on the moving photo feature like Apple's Live Photo or Samsung's Motion Photo.

The difference is instead of having a short video, you mark out the specific portion of the video you want to animate, while the rest of the video remains static. Thus, you can have a video of a subject waving while other objects or people in the scene are frozen in place.

Another camera trick lets you use an alternate photo as a backdrop for your self-portrait.

For instance, the app can extract a picture of you and merge it neatly with a photo of a tourist hotspot to give the impression you were actually there.

For the most part, the cameras produce pleasant-looking photos that show a good dynamic range. There are occasional hiccups in the processing where blotches show up when you zoom in on the photo, but overall, the V40's cameras offer solid performance.

They fare decently in low light too. Photos have acceptable noise and appear to have been brightened up. But some of these low-light shots appear to have a greenish tinge.

The portrait-mode shots I take with the front camera-unit are free from unpleasant bokeh artefacts – probably because there are two cameras at work.

My face and upper body are perfectly in focus while the background is blurred. The amount of blur can be adjusted before taking the photo.

I do have some minor grouses about the V40. Firstly, its fingerprint sensor feels a tad slow to unlock the phone compared with other recent models I have tested.

The phone runs on Android 8.1, which feels dated when many phones, including cheaper models, already come with Android 9.0. Even Samsung has upgraded its Galaxy S9 series to Android 9.0.

LG has cleaned up the home screen by organising its pre-loaded, proprietary apps into folders. But I prefer if some of these apps had been removed in the first place.

Its battery stamina, too, is average at best because of its modest 3,300mAh battery. You probably

have to charge it every day. In the video-loop battery test, the V40 lasted 10 hours and 20 minutes, which is around five hours fewer than the uptime achieved by the Samsung Galaxy Note9.

Timing is everything and with Samsung poised to launch the Galaxy S10 in a couple of weeks with a new design and a faster processor, the V40 is a tough sell.

But LG has priced it at a competitive \$1,098 and, if you buy it before Feb 22, you get a complimentary LG W7 smartwatch (worth \$598) for free.

• **Verdict: LG's five-camera smartphone offers solid performance and high-end features at a competitive price. But its battery life could be better.**

vinchang@sph.com.sg



SPECS
PRICE: \$1,098
PROCESSOR: Qualcomm Snapdragon 845 (Quad-core 2.8GHz, quad-core 1.7GHz)
DISPLAY: 6.4-inch, Oled, 3,120 x 1,440 pixels, 538 ppi pixel density
OPERATING SYSTEM: Android 8.1
MEMORY: 128GB (microSD expandable to 2TB), 6GB RAM
REAR CAMERAS: 12MP (f/1.5), 16MP wide-angle (f/1.9), 12MP telephoto camera (f/2.4)
FRONT CAMERA: 8MP (f/1.9), 5MP wide-angle (f/2.2)
BATTERY: Non-removable 3,300mAh battery
RATING
FEATURES: 4/5
DESIGN: 3.5/5
PERFORMANCE: 4/5
VALUE FOR MONEY: 4/5
BATTERY LIFE: 3.5/5
OVERALL: 4/5

Wearables

Smart running shoes do double duty

Trevor Tan



Launched early this month, the Under Armour (UA) Hovr Infinite is the first model of the 2019 Hovr running shoes series to be available.

This year, all UA Hovr running shoes will come with an embedded sensor that connects to UA's MapMyRun app (Android and iOS). The sensor is able to track running distance, pace and split times, as well as gait metrics like cadence and stride length. In short, they are all smart running shoes.

In the coming months, UA will be releasing its Hovr Guardian stability trainers for overpronators and its Hovr Velociti 2 speed trainers that are meant for race-day use.

Unlike them, the Hovr Infinite is a pair of neutral trainers designed for distance training.

It features UA Hovr's foam midsole that extends from heel to forefoot to fully cradle and cushion the foot. The midsole is surrounded by an outer cage that is said to help the runner's foot move efficiently through heel strikes.

The rubber outsole has a textured pattern to provide enhanced grip. In addition, it has deep flex-grooves that follow the foot's natural flex angles for smoother transition during foot strikes.

The upper is a two-piece construction with the forefoot area having a breathable mesh and the heel area having a tighter structure.

The Infinite is not a fashion statement.

But function-wise, it is up there with the best. The shoes feel comfortable from the start. I like the ventilation it provides and that its heel counter offers ample support for my injury-prone ankles.

In addition, the Infinite provides great cushioning for my knees.

Perhaps the only issue is its lack of significant rebound, unlike, say, the Adidas Ultra Boost running shoes.

The sensor is embedded in the right shoe. Tilt the right shoe up, with the heel as the fulcrum, to start the pairing process between the sensor and the MapMyRun app on your smartphone.

The sensor can track your run without being connected to the app, but you will need to be running at a fairly brisk pace – at least 8.7 minute a kilometre – for the shoes to register your run. You can sync it with the app after the run.

When running with the app connected, it uses the smartphone's GPS to track distance with map route and elevation, in addition to the run metrics that the sensor collects.

With the app connected, the Infinite is spot-on in tracking the distance of my 5km jogging route. When not connected to the app, it tracked around 400m less over the same route. This is not bad, given some fitness trackers and GPS watches have similar deviations

when tracking workouts automatically.

In addition, the app will provide tips like suggesting the right stride length to prevent injuries.

Despite being a pair of smart running shoes, the Hovr Infinite is still affordable at \$219. Many normal running shoes, such as the Ultra Boost, cost more than that.

• **Verdict: The Under Armour Hovr Infinite is a pair of smart running shoes that is surprisingly superb at being a trainer and a run tracker.**

SPECS
PRICE: \$219
MATERIAL: Under Armour's Hovr midsole with rubber outsole and mesh upper
HEEL DROP: 8mm
WEIGHT: 305g (Men's US 9)
RATING
DESIGN: 3.5/5
PERFORMANCE: 4/5
VALUE FOR MONEY: 4.5/5
OVERALL: 4/5

Rugged fitness watch that ticks the right boxes

Trevor Tan

The Garmin Instinct is a rugged fitness watch. It comes with multiple navigation systems (GPS, Glonass and Galileo), a built-in heart-rate monitor, multi-sports tracking ability and a daily fitness tracker. It also has a digital compass, altimeter and barometer.

It can withstand temperatures from minus 20 to 60 deg C and drops from a height of up to 122cm and is water-resistant to a depth of 100m.

Its round fibre-reinforced polymer 45mm watchcase houses two monochrome displays – a primary octagonal one and a smaller circular one at the two o'clock position. Both are surrounded by hefty bezels.

From far, it looks uncannily like a Casio G-Shock watch.

While its rugged looks will appeal to some, it probably is not an ideal watch to wear in formal settings.

As it does not have a touchscreen, navigating its interface requires the pressing of several buttons.

There are three buttons on its left and two on its right.

The top right button is for activating GPS tracking and selecting options, while the bottom right button works as the back button. The top left one is the backlight button, and the middle and bottom left buttons serve as the up and down buttons respectively.

Figuring out which buttons to press can get quite confusing, especially given the plethora of information displayed.

Pressing the middle and bottom left buttons lets you toggle through screens that show the main watch face, heart rate, calendar, weather and notifications. At each of these screens, holding down the middle left button allows you to change the settings of that particular screen.

For instance, if you want to

change the main watch face, hold down the left middle button to get to the settings page. Next, press the top right button to select the watch face options, press the middle and bottom left buttons to toggle through the choices, before pressing the top right button again to choose the preferred one.

Confused? It will take you a while to get used to the interface.

But when it comes to tracking runs through GPS, the Instinct is spot-on, with its readings showing a negligible 50m difference from the actual distance of my usual 5km jogging route.

In terms of tracking steps, its readings are only 3 per off from my calibrated Apple Watch Series 4.

The Instinct's heart-rate readings also closely match my Apple Watch's most of the time, deviating by at most two beats a minute, whether during workouts or when I am sitting down.

The Instinct can be paired with a smartphone to show notifications of incoming calls, e-mail messages, WhatsApp messages and others. You can also answer or reject calls with it when it is paired with an Android smartphone, though not with an iPhone.

It does not have the Garmin Pay cashless payment feature. And it does not support Garmin's Connect IQ, which means there is no way you can add apps or widgets like you can with Garmin's Fenix series.

However, its battery life is superb. It is rated at two weeks in smart-watch mode and up to 16 hours in GPS mode. I wear the watch – with notifications switched on – daily for 10 days, during which I do two 5km GPS-tracked runs. The battery level dropped only to 40 per cent.

• **Verdict: The Garmin Instinct is a good choice for those wanting a rugged fitness watch to work out with.**



SPECS
PRICE: \$499
CONNECTIVITY: Bluetooth, ANT+
WATER RESISTANCE: 100m
WEIGHT: 52g (with rubber strap)
RATING
FEATURES: 4/5
DESIGN: 3/5
PERFORMANCE: 4/5
BATTERY LIFE: 5/5
VALUE FOR MONEY: 3/5
OVERALL: 3.5/5

Tech Life Hacks

Hellish online hunt for second-hand goods

Singapore’s economy is doing too well such that sellers can afford to sit and wait



John Lui

For a few weeks, I was a used-items online shopping addict. Lurking on Carousell, eBay and Gumtree became more like a job than my real job. Sorting, picking and eliminating on a loop was my routine. On my phone or laptop, I tracked things and people with the alert but bemused air of an old gambler eyeing a bank of slot machines, waiting for a hot streak. “Oh, here’s the grandfather clock guy again. What’s new with him? Well, it looks like he is still trying to sell that \$2,000 monstrosity. Who on earth will want that?” I might

say to myself, with an air of one who can see the seller’s soul, when all others see only an advertisement for a clock. Second-hand sites are a lot like digging through a mysterious old trunk, the kind that heroes in children’s books find washed up on the beach. Pirate booty lies within, I hoped, as I clicked, refreshed and curated a killer list of “likes”. It was my mixtape and, like all mixtapes, impossibly cool to the person who made it, and stupid and random to everyone else. When second-hand fever had me, I bought two Macbooks (an Air and a Pro, both from 2012), three iPhones (two 6s Pluses and a 6s) and a pair of headphones. Call me a coward, but I never sold anything. There are buyers out there, seasoned friends tell me, who are demons sent to try our souls. The Unpunctual Uncle, the No-Show Knuckleheads, the Sob-Story Students – I had no wish to toy with such dark forces. Lately, though, the fever is leaving my body. It is because of this: Sellers are looking for dumb-dumbs, and so are buyers, and never the twain shall meet. To know what I mean, look at how the retail space market in Singapore works. All around us are malls struggling

with falling foot traffic. Shops are empty. Rent is killing us, say the shopkeepers, but landlords remain deaf. For the owners, no rent is better than low rent. They can sit it out. I am no property analyst – I have lived in the same Housing Board flat for over a decade – but landlords are on a sucker hunt. They figure that there is enough value in the rising price of their space to offset the no-rent bleeding. There are now malls where your footsteps echo down the corridors like that of a prisoner’s down death row. That is how it is with second-hand marketplaces in Singapore. Our economy is doing too well for there to be a big enough group of sellers who need cash. When in Tokyo a few years ago, I got a great deal on a used guitar because of deflation. So it is a weird problem to have, but it is one that affects buyers and sellers of used goods. A strong economy means buyers can afford to buy new, while sellers can afford to sit and wait. When a seller considers the nuisance factor of seller-buyer meet-ups, the profit is not worth the time and effort, so he would rather dump the item at the bin centre or sell it to a middleman.

So those deals that I watched famous tech YouTubers gloat over – the incredibly priced old IBM laptops and MacBooks that they score online – are rare here. Also, the tech bargain-hunting YouTubers in the United States all seem to have a truck, so hauling bulky buys is never a problem. Now, I did land one “score”, though: A 2012, 15-inch, non-Retina MacBook Pro for \$800. I pulled out the mechanical hard disk and the DVD drive, replacing them with two solid-state drives. It is a zippy machine now. I found out too late that the speaker is blown and the wireless card is wonky – which partly explains why the seller priced it low – but still, I am pleased. Am I pleased because it took such hard work to find it? Or am I pleased because it is actually a good machine? I can’t say. I will know for sure only when I find the courage to see both sides of the transaction, and work up the guts to be a seller. Only then will I know the unique pain of spelling out the standard warning, “Not for fussy buyers”, which I am told never works against the demon known as the Defect Detective, the guy who notices a scratch and demands \$100 off. johnlui@sph.com.sg

Audio

Enjoy great surround sound

Trevor Tan

Creative’s Sxfi Air is the local audio firm’s first Bluetooth headphones to feature the company’s critically acclaimed Super X-Fi (Sxfi) head-phone holography technology. Sxfi replicates the 3D audio you get from a finely tuned surround-sound set-up in a room with just a pair of headphones. It uses the Sxfi app (available only on Android at press time) to map the ears and face of the user and store a profile to provide the best surround-sound experience. Available in white and black (version tested), the Air looks like any pair of over-ear headphones. It has a faux leather-covered metallic head-band that connects the ear cups. Each ear cup has a replaceable memory foam with a ring of RGB lighting (choose from 16.7 million colours) on its exterior. By default, it is lit in blue when powered on. The right ear cup has no buttons, while the left one has plenty of them, including a power button, a Bluetooth/Source button, an Sxfi button, a microSD card slot, a 3.5mm audio jack, a microphone and a USB-C port for charging and PC connection. Pressing the Bluetooth/Source button toggles the audio source through Bluetooth, microSD and USB-C. The left ear cup supports touch gestures. Swiping up and down on its surface increases and decreases the volume respectively, while swiping left goes to the previous track and swiping right goes to the next track. The Air works with Windows and macOS computers as well as the PlayStation 4 gaming console and both Android and Apple smartphones. For this review, I use it primarily with an Apple iPhone XS Max. In fact, the Air is designed specifically for iPhone users. The first Sxfi product – the Amp – is a USB-C dongle that is not compatible with iPhone’s Lightning port. The Air is Creative’s solution for iPhone users to enjoy – wirelessly – the benefits of Sxfi. For this review, a beta version of the Sxfi iOS app is used as it is not yet available on the Apple App Store. Since I already have an Sxfi account, I log in with the iOS app to find my Sxfi personalised profile and do not need to re-do the head-mapping procedure.



The only thing I need to do is to pair the Air with the app to load the personalised profile. To do so, press and hold the Bluetooth/Source button for two seconds for the app to connect to the Air. Once the profile has been loaded into the Air, I can use the headphones with any device to enjoy the surround sound. With the Air, I hear the same excellent surround sound I had experienced with the Amp. Whether it is listening to music or watching movies, the audio experience is up several notches. For instance, when watching the 2018 movie Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom, I am able to sense where the balls of lava are landing just by listening. Perhaps the most useful feature about the Air is when one is playing games. Playing the Player-Unknown’s Battlegrounds Mobile battle royale shooter on the iPhone XS Max, I can discern where the bullets are coming from and run to safety, thus increasing my chances of survival in the game. But while the sound output is excellent, the build of the Air is less so. The plastic ear cups feel cheap, with the texture of the memory foam a bit rough. Plus, I find my ears getting warm after wearing the Air for an hour. There is also no dedicated light or voice prompt to indicate if Sxfi is activated. Instead, you have to remove the headphones, press the Sxfi button and wait for the RGB lighting to light up in green to indicate that Sxfi has been activated. The Air lacks active noise-

cancelling, a feature found in many headphones these days. It also lacks Near Field Communication technology for easy pairing. Nonetheless, the best part about the Air is its affordable price tag. At \$219, it is cheaper than a lot of headphones in the market.

• **Verdict: The Creative Sxfi Air provides a great avenue for iPhone users who want to enjoy the stunning surround sound Super X-Fi has to offer.**

SPECS
PRICE: \$219, available from Feb 28
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz to 20kHz
IMPEDANCE: 32ohms
DRIVERS: 50mm neodymium magnet
CONNECTIVITY: Bluetooth 4.2, USB-C, 3.5mm headphone jack, microSD slot
WEIGHT: 338g
RATING
FEATURES: 3/5
DESIGN: 3/5
PERFORMANCE: 4/5
BATTERY LIFE: 4/5
VALUE FOR MONEY: 4/5
OVERALL: 4/5

New products



LG XBoom AI ThinQ WK7
SMART SPEAKER

\$399
With the built-in Google Assistant digital voice assistant, the LG XBoom AI ThinQ WK7 is a smart speaker that can recognise up to six voices and cater to different members of a family. For instance, they can each ask the voice assistant for their personal daily schedule. The cylindrical-shaped WK7 can also control other Google Assistant-enabled smart devices, like smart lights and door cameras. It is said to deliver high-fidelity audio, clear vocals and accurate bass, according to its maker.



Olympus OM-DE-M1X
MIRRORLESS CAMERA

Pricing to be confirmed, available this month
Olympus’ latest mirrorless camera OM-D E-M1X is designed for sports and wildlife photographers. Featuring a 20.4-megapixel Live MOS Micro Four Thirds sensor and dual TruePic VIII image processors, it can shoot a whopping 60 frames per second (fps). It has 121 cross-type on-chip phase detection autofocus (AF) points for more accurate focusing. Its integrated vertical grip design lets users quickly switch between shooting in landscape and portrait orientations.



Samsung 970 Evo Plus
SOLID-STATE DRIVE

\$132.90 (250GB), \$235.90 (500GB), \$450.90 (1TB) and \$924.90 (2TB), available next month

Looking to improve the performance of your do-it-yourself PC? Upgrade to Samsung’s latest solid-state drive (SSD), the 970 Evo Plus. It comes in the compact M.2 form factor and uses the PCIe Gen3 x4 interface found in most modern computers. It delivers sequential read and write speeds of up to 3,500MB per second and up to 3,300MB per second respectively – a 57 per cent performance improvement over its predecessor, the 970 Evo.



Jabra Evolve 65t
TRUE WIRELESS IN-EAR HEADPHONES

\$511
Designed for business executives on the move, the Evolve 65t is the first true wireless in-ear headphones to attain Skype for Business certification, according to Jabra. Its four-microphone technology enables optimal call quality, while multiple fitting options ensures a snug in-ear fit that helps block out ambient sound. It can connect to two devices – such as a smartphone and a laptop – at the same time, so you will not miss any call. Users can also press a button to access the voice assistant of their choice.



ROG Zephyrus S (GX701)
GAMING LAPTOP

\$4,998, available this month

Asus’ ROG Zephyrus S (GX701) is one of the first gaming laptops to be equipped with the latest Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 graphics processing unit. At only 18.7mm thick, this gaming laptop is the thinnest and most compact 17-inch gaming laptop currently available, according to its maker. Flanked by 6.9mm-thick bezels on three sides, its 17.3-inch display fits into a chassis normally meant for 15.7-inch screens. The display supports Nvidia’s G-Sync technology that helps eliminate visual tearing.



HP Tango
PRINTER

\$219, available this month
Supporting voice assistants such as Google Assistant, Amazon Alexa and Microsoft Cortana, the HP Tango allows users to ask it to print documents. It comes with a cloud-based, two-way network connection that lets you print, scan and copy with any device and from anywhere using the HP Smart app, as long as you have an Internet connection. You can also check on the ink level, so you can purchase new ink while you are out shopping. The thermal inkjet printer can print up to 20 A4 monochrome pages a minute and up to 19 A4 colour pages a minute.

Compiled by Trevor Tan

Be a tiger mum or driven dad in this video game

New game in China lets players raise a son or daughter. Fans say the game is a poignant exercise in role reversal

SHANGHAI • You want your children to do well in school. You want them to have nice friends and interesting hobbies and not go out with creeps. You may even want them to be happy.

But in this computer game, you can always start over with a new digital child if things do not work out as planned.

A new game in China puts players in control of those most fearsome of characters: Mum and Dad. The mission? Raise a son or daughter from cradle to college.

In a nation of famously demanding, scolding and, yes, sometimes loving mothers and fathers, the game, *Chinese Parents*, is a hit.

Since its release in September, it has found a huge audience on Steam, an online marketplace run by American game maker Valve Corp. There are no official figures for how many people have downloaded the game, but it has provoked heated discussion online, while earning tens of thousands of reviews.

Mr Yang Ge Yilang, a founder of Moyuwan Games, the independent studio that developed *Chinese Parents*, said he hoped to produce an English version this year.

The success of the game, which costs US\$9.99 (S\$13.60) to play, does not appear to be driven by people hoping to exact revenge for their own upbringing. Quite the opposite: Some fans have written that, by letting them experience childhood from their parents' perspective, it had moved them to tears.

"I used to not understand many things my mum made me do when I was little," said Mr Kang Shenghao, 19, a professional blogger in the north-eastern city of Qinhuangdao. "But when I play the game and try to boost figures for my son so he can unlock more achievements and marry the prettiest girl in school, I start to understand my parents more."

All the joys and trials of raising children are here. Players choose between pushing their digital progeny to attain conventional success and allowing them some semblance of childhood innocence.

They must give career guidance and endure (just barely) their teenager's first dates. Everything



Mr Kang Shenghao, 19, playing the video game *Chinese Parents* with his mother. PHOTO: NYTIMES

leads up to the gaokao, the highly competitive college entrance exam that decides the fortunes of so many young Chinese people.

Mr Yang said he hoped to make a smartphone version of the game that would allow players to see how their virtual offspring stack up against their friends'. Chinese parents love nothing more than boasting to their peers about how wonderful their children are.

"We want to give gamers a chance to change the role from Chinese children to Chinese parents and see what would they do in the same position," Mr Yang, 30, said.

Parent-child relationships everywhere can swing from reverence to rebellion and back. In China, they are changing as quickly as the nation as a whole.

For many decades, an official one-child policy meant that Chinese boys and girls carried the entire weight of their parents' hopes for betterment. Population controls have eased (though the game's children do not have siblings), and economic growth has created more opportunities for advancement.

Scoring well on the gaokao is no longer the only ticket to a brighter future. Parents today are more likely to wonder whether unhealthy amounts of stress are turn-

I used to not understand many things my mum made me do. But when I play the game and try to boost figures for my son so he can unlock more achievements... I start to understand my parents more.



MR KANG SHENGHAO, 19, a professional blogger in the north-eastern city of Qinhuangdao

ing their children into emotionally dampened automatons.

But the surge in wealth has also raised expectations for career success. And it has given the well-off new ways to keep their children ahead of the pack. The high-pressure parenting style brought to

wide attention by Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn Of The Tiger Mother* (2011) has not gone away in China. It is evolving.

In *Chinese Parents*, a virtual child's life unfolds over 48 rounds. In each round, players arrange courses and activities – piano lessons, swim classes, creative writing, coding and more. You can also buy gifts: ice cream, toys, even *Learn To Speak With Jack Ma*, a book featuring the billionaire co-founder of the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.

These choices shape how your child develops along six dimensions: intelligence, emotional intelligence, physical fitness, imagination, memory and charm.

A bar on the screen reflects how much psychological pressure the child is feeling. Pile on too much schoolwork, and the child may crack. But don't let your score for "parental satisfaction" fall too low, either.

Another score captures the concept of "face", supremely important in Chinese culture. If a child loses face by doing badly in school, a summer trip to Europe could be cancelled.

Over time, adolescent love bubbles up. How far does that go? Let it just be said that Chinese censors do not abide video games considered

less than wholesome.

A child's final scores determine what happens after she leaves home. There are more than 200 colleges, including vocational schools and elite universities, that might offer a spot.

The socially adept have their pick of compatible mates. There are myriad career possibilities: taxi driver, celebrity author, e-commerce mogul, Beyonce.

The earliest version of *Chinese Parents* gave players only the option of raising a son. In the current version, those who choose to have a daughter get reminders about attitudes that remain common in China. Her virtual grandmother says girls do not need to do as well as boys in school. Her mother says that for a girl, the ultimate goal of hard work is to marry a good man.

Chinese Parents does not end when the digital child is grown. If she ends up with good character scores and a solid education and career, the next generation in the game starts out with better character scores.

On the flip side, "if you mess up the first generation, it will be harder for the following generations to make outstanding achievements", Mr Yang, the game's developer, said. NYTIMES

A school that embraces a trendy model: The start-up

NEW YORK • They brainstorm in conference rooms equipped with whiteboards, use high-end computers and equipment and are given free breakfast and lunch.

Except these are no start-up workers. They are students at an unusual New York City public high school embedded inside a technology and manufacturing hub with more than 400 companies at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

It was developed with industry leaders to teach real-life job skills that would lay the foundation for the next generation of workers in a city where the tech industry is flourishing with the expanding presence of Google and Amazon's plans to build a large campus in Queens.

While classrooms in New York and elsewhere have increasingly focused on preparing children for jobs in a tech economy, the recently opened school, Brooklyn Steam Centre, has taken it one step further by locating itself next to companies where students might actually work. It is one of only a handful of programmes in the United States that are situated in a workplace.

"Our ambition is that it will be a next-generation model for career and technical schools here in New York City," said Mr David Ehrenberg, president and chief executive



Instructor Mitchell Almonte (foreground) works with students during a construction technology class at the Brooklyn Steam Centre. PHOTO: NYTIMES

officer of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development, a non-profit that manages the city-owned, 121 ha waterfront site where battleships, like the USS Missouri, were once built.

The Navy Yard already has an on-site job centre, but Mr Ehrenberg said the school will help ensure that more local residents have the necessary technical skills and training for the jobs being created there.

The programme offers students a chance to show what they can do.

"Instead of learning on paper – and maybe you forget it, and maybe you don't – you put your hands into the work," Jordan Gomes, 16, said.

Yesterday, the schools chancellor, Mr Richard Carranza, and other city leaders officially opened the school's US\$17 million (S\$23.1 million) home at the Navy Yard, about two weeks after students moved in.

The Steam Centre – standing for science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics – grew out of a pilot programme to increase career and technical education opportunities among Brooklyn high school students.

Today, 221 juniors and seniors spend half the day at other high schools taking required academic classes and the other half at the centre specialising in one of five tracks: design and engineering; computer

science and information technology; film and media; construction technology; and culinary arts and hospitality management.

The students apply to the centre and are selected by their high schools. There is no minimum required grade-point average or test score.

In New York, the Steam Centre is one of only two schools at a workplace; the other, Aviation High School, offers classes at LaGuardia Airport.

"We're certainly looking for more opportunities for our students to be as close to the industries they are studying as possible," said Mr Phil Weinberg, the Education Department's deputy chief academic officer for teaching and learning.

Citywide, there are 301 career and technical programmes – 47 opened in the past three years. In total, the programmes enrol about 64,000 students and train them for careers ranging from software engineer to harbour master.

Still, some educators and parents have raised concerns that such highly specialised programmes are a form of tracking that can lead students to focus too early on a particular job or career and be steered away from college.

Mr David C. Bloomfield, a professor of educational leadership, law and policy at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Centre, said the Steam Centre needed to be thoroughly vetted by parents, independent industry experts and college representatives to ensure that it puts the needs of students over employers.

"There's a danger that it's either a self-serving track for low-skilled jobs right out of high school, or that

it teaches skills that will be obsolete once they complete college," he said.

The Steam Centre was developed by Mr Kayon Pryce, the founding principal, along with Mr Ehrenberg and Dr Lester W. Young Jr, a member of the state Board of Regents and a former city education official. It initially held classes in two high schools before moving to the Navy Yard.

The emphasis at the school is on being relevant in a modern tech world. Students master design, engineering and construction skills by transforming two shipping containers into smart homes. Computer science students wired the new computer lab; now they maintain the network and troubleshoot problems. Film and media students recorded podcasts, and shot and edited a commercial promoting the school.

The school also teaches soft skills – or what Mr Pryce calls "21st-century success skills" – such as the importance of showing up on time, responding to e-mail and getting along with co-workers. Students also learn to network, coming up with a 30-second "elevator pitch" – the time it takes to ride the elevator up to the centre's home on the third floor.

Deon Watts, 16, said the lessons would not only help her succeed in a male-dominated construction industry, but also assist her in becoming the boss of her own company.

"It's not like your English class can teach you how to build a box or fix an electrical circuit," she said. "It's important because that's how you're going to survive in the real world. It's not as easy as reading a book." NYTIMES



(From left) Director Han Yew Kwang, actress Jesseca Liu, actor-comedian Jeremy Chan, singer-actress Ferlyn G and singer-actor Nathan Hartono at the press conference for When Ghost Meets Zombie yesterday. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Tough playing a zombie

Home-grown singer-actor Nathan Hartono, who plays a zombie in When Ghost Meets Zombie, says the role was an exhausting one

Benson Ang
Lifestyle Correspondent

When Ghost Meets Zombie marks the first time home-grown singer-actor Nathan Hartono plays the lead in a movie.

And adding to the challenge was having to dance and getting covered from head to toe in paint.

The 27-year-old plays Pong, a zombie who is forced by a female ghost, played by Singaporean singer-actress Ferlyn G, 27, to join a Mr Perfect competition to fulfil her own pageant dreams.

The Mandarin romance comedy opens tomorrow and also stars Singapore-based actress Jesseca Liu and local actor-comedian Jeremy Chan.

During a press conference at Mandarin Oriental Singapore hotel yesterday, Hartono said: “When you are dancing, it is really a different type of tiredness. The tiredness I am used to comes from acting, being in the recording studio or studying all day.

“But when it comes to dancing, I have to remember all the moves. After the rehearsals, I literally felt like a zombie.”

As a zombie, he also had to put on a lot of make-up. And for one scene



Hartono (left, with actress Ferlyn G) had to be covered in bronze paint in a scene in the film. PHOTO: GOLDEN VILLAGE PICTURES

as a statue, he had to be covered in bronze paint.

“That was the worst,” he said. “I couldn’t sit, lie down or lean on anything all day. I could only stand and walk around.”

Perhaps of greater note for fans is the fact he was shirtless in that scene. Hartono worked out to look good on screen and added: “I also wanted to have the energy (for the shoots) because I know filming can be exhausting.”

There was one unexpected benefit to playing a zombie.

He hardly had any lines and did not have to stress over memorising dialogue. “I was just making noises

here and there,” he said happily.

For Ferlyn G, whose character has a passionate, driven streak, one challenge was finding a sense of balance.

She said: “I had to be a bit like an ‘ahlian’, but not too much. At times, I also had to be loud, but not to the point that people would find annoying.”

To get it right, she hung out with “slightly ahlian” friends to understand their mannerisms and way of speaking.

The film’s home-grown director Han Yew Kwang had previously helmed the romantic comedy 18 Grams Of Love (2007) and sex comedy Rubbers (2014).

The 43-year-old said: “This movie is not too different from my previous work. Its main themes are still love, kinship and friendship. It just uses a new concept.”

Ghosts and zombies, he said, are total opposites. “One has no body, the other has no soul – yet even these two can fall in love. I hope people will watch this movie – whether they are single or in a relationship. I am sure they will be inspired.”

bang@sph.com.sg

• When Ghost Meets Zombie opens in Singapore tomorrow.

The new Picasso? Meet Ai-Da the robot artist

FALMOUTH (England) • Can robots be creative?

British gallery owner Aidan Meller hopes to go some way towards answering that question with Ai-Da, who her makers say will be able to draw people from sight with a pencil in her bionic hand.

Mr Meller is overseeing the final stages of her construction by engineers at Cornwall-based Engineered Arts.

He calls Ai-Da – named after British mathematician and computer pioneer Ada Lovelace – the world’s first “AI ultra-realistic robot artist” and his ambition is for her to perform like her human equivalents.

AI is short for artificial intelligence.

“She’s going to actually be drawing and we’re hoping to then build technology for her to paint,” Mr Meller said after seeing Ai-Da’s prosthetic head being carefully brought to life by specialists individually attaching hairs to form her eyebrows.

“But also as a performance artist, she’ll be able to engage with audiences and actually get messages across; asking those questions about technology today.”

Her skeletal robotic head may stand disembodied on a workbench, but her movements are very much alive.

Cameras in each of her eyeballs recognise human features – she will make eye contact and follow you around the room, opening and closing her mouth as you do. Get too



close and she will back away, blink, as if in shock.

Ai-Da’s makers say she will have a “RoboThespian” body with expressive movements and she will talk and answer questions.

“There’s AI running in the computer vision that allows the robot to track faces to recognise facial features and to mimic your expression,” said Mr Marcus Hold, design and production engineer at Engineered Arts.

Ai-Da’s makers are using “Mesmer” life-like robot technology for

her head and, once finished, she will have a mixed-race appearance with long dark hair, silicone skin and 3D printed teeth and gums.

“(Mesmer) brings together the development of software mechanics and electronics to produce a life-like face with life-like gestures in a small human sized package,” Mr Hold said.

Ai-Da will present her inaugural exhibition Unsecured Futures in May at the University of Oxford, and her sketches will go on display in London in November. REUTERS

The rubberised head of Ai-Da, a humanoid robot capable of drawing people from life using her bionic eyes and hand, is given life-like features by Mr Mike Humphrey from robotics company Engineered Arts. PHOTO: REUTERS

Exclusively for subscribers of The Straits Times

Asian Masters cooking demonstration by chef Selamat Susanto

Asian Masters returns for its seventh edition from March 1, 2019 till Feb 29, 2020 and celebrates the best of Asian gastronomy.

The programme line-up includes a series of cooking demonstrations by renowned chefs from top Asian restaurants.



The Straits Times is giving away 30 pairs of passes to this session on March 2 at 10am.

HOW TO WIN

1. Download the SPH Rewards app.
2. Look for the giveaway in the Rewards section.
3. Press the “JOIN” button and answer this question:

This cooking demonstration by chef Selamat Susanto and hosted by ST senior food correspondent Wong Ah Yoke is part of Asian Masters 2019. True or False?

The contest ends on Feb 22. Terms and conditions apply.



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I don't want to hide, says Rushdie, 30 years after fatwa



Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was branded blasphemous and on Feb 14, 1989, Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered his execution. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The author, who has stopped using an assumed name since Sept 11, 2001, says he has been leading a completely normal life in New York for two decades

PARIS • After decades spent in the shadow of a death sentence pronounced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Salman Rushdie is quietly defiant. "I don't want to live hidden away," he told Agence France-Presse during a visit to Paris. The novelist's life changed forever on Feb 14, 1989, when Iran's spiritual leader ordered Rushdie's execution after branding his novel *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous. Like a kind of reverse Valentine, Teheran renewed the fatwa year after year. Rushdie, who some say is the great-

est writer India has produced since Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), spent 13 years living under a false name and constant police protection. "I was 41 back then, now I am 71. Things are fine now," he said in September. "We live in a world where the subject changes very fast. And this is a very old subject. There are now many other things to be frightened about – and other people to kill," he added ruefully. Rushdie stopped using an assumed name in the months after Sept 11, 2001, three years after Teheran said the threat against him was "over". But armed plainclothes police nonetheless sat outside the door of his French publisher's office in Paris during an interview with Agence France-Presse. Several others had taken up positions in the courtyard. Earlier, Rushdie had assured a sceptical audience at a book festival in eastern France that he led a "completely normal life" in New York,

where he has lived for nearly two decades. "I take the subway," he said. The *Satanic Verses* was Rushdie's fifth book, and he has now written his 18th. Titled *The Golden House*, it is about a man from Mumbai, who much like the author, reinvents himself in the Big Apple in a bid to shake off his past. The dark years of riots, bomb plots and the murder of one of the book's translators and the shooting and stabbing of two others now "feels like a very long time ago", he said. "Islam was not a thing. No one was thinking in that way," he explained of the period when *The Satanic Verses* was written. "One of the things that has happened is that people in the West are more informed than they used to be," he added. Even so, the book was greatly misunderstood, he insisted: "Really it's a novel about South Asian immigrants in London." Rushdie's friend, the British Pak-

istani writer Hanif Kureishi, reckons no one "would have the balls today to write *The Satanic Verses*, let alone publish it." But even Kureishi, who wrote an acclaimed novel *The Buddha* in its aftermath about young British Muslims radicalising themselves, admitted that he never saw the controversy coming when he read a proof copy. He mused: "I didn't notice anything about it that might rouse the fundamentalists. I saw it as a book about psychosis, about newness and change." Yet the fury it generated was a milestone in the rise of political Islam. Indian author and journalist Salil Tripathi of PEN International, which campaigns for writers' rights, said he hoped major publishers would still be brave enough to publish *The Satanic Verses*. "I have not totally lost hope, but undoubtedly the Rushdie case has created a mental brake. "A lot of subjects are now seen as

taboo," he conceded. Today, intimidation is carried out by foot soldiers rather than declared by governments, he said, suggesting that now all religious clerics have to do to rouse the angry masses is to voice their dislike for a publication. Mr Sean Gallagher, of the London-based Index on Censorship, said the world has not moved on much since the Rushdie affair. "The issues we deal with now are the same. The debate over blasphemy laws is part of a cyclical conversation that is pretty necessary. It's important we continue to be vigilant about freedom of expression and have these cultural dialogues," he explained. Rushdie himself is equally philosophical. Asked if he should have written the book, he replied, "I take the Edith Piaf position: Je ne regrette rien (I regret nothing)," quoting the French singer's famous anthem of battered defiance. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

தமிழ்மூசு

India

10,000 youths vow not to marry without parents' consent

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The art and science of Japan's cherry blossom forecast



Sakura season is big business in Japan. Blooms begin as early as March in southern Kyushu and appear as late as May in northernmost Hokkaido. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

TOKYO • As spring approaches in Japan, the country's weather forecasters face one of their biggest missions of the year: predicting exactly when the famed cherry blossoms will bloom. Japan's sakura or cherry blossom season is feverishly anticipated by locals and visitors alike. Many tourists plan their entire trips around the blooms and Japanese flock to parks in the millions to enjoy the seasonal spectacle. "People pay more attention to the cherry blossom season than any other flower in Japan," Mr Ryo Dojo, an official of the statistics unit at the Japan Meteorological Agency, told Agence France-Presse. The most basic element of predicting when the delicate pink and white petals will begin to unfurl is a large data set of temperatures. That is because the flowers will come earlier if temperatures rise quickly in spring, Mr Dojo said. Conversely, if temperatures in the autumn and winter period are higher than usual, the blooms can end up being delayed. Extreme weather can affect the trees too, with unusual patterns last year prompting some blossoms to appear in October, well before the usual season.

In general, blooms begin as early as March in southern Kyushu and appear as late as May in northernmost Hokkaido. In a bid to improve its forecasts, some outfits have started crowd-sourcing data, including Weathernews, a firm in Chiba near Tokyo. It relies on photos of buds sent in regularly by 10,000 citizens across the country who are registered on the company's website and app. "Cherry blossom forecasting is impossible for us without this system," spokesman Miku Toma said. The company launched what they call the "sakura project" in 2004, signing up members who choose their own cherry tree and send pictures of its buds to the firm at regular intervals. "We realised we could see the details of how buds grow, thanks to the pictures sent to us," Ms Toma said. "So we decided to incorporate the project to help predict blossoms." Just observing the bud can give surprisingly accurate information about how far the flower is from full bloom. A sakura bud still a month from blossoming will be small and firm, but after 10 days, the tip turns slightly yellow-green, and then a

darker green part emerges. When the tip of the bud turns a faint pink, it is just a week until bloom-time. Thanks to the project, Weathernews has accumulated data from two million reports on cherry flower buds in the past 15 years, which it uses to increase the accuracy of its forecasting. It also incorporates weather data collected from its own observation devices across Japan – 13,000 locations in total, 10 times more than the official weather agency has. Weathernews employees also call around 700 parks regularly to check the growth of cherry flower buds. The company and other forecasters also employ mathematical models and algorithms. Otenki Japan, a forecaster run by a subsidiary of precision-equipment manufacturer Shimadzu, even began using artificial intelligence to predict cherry blossoms last year. The forecasts are not only for flower fans, but reflect the fact that sakura season is big business in Japan. Cherry blossoms symbolise the fragility of life in Japanese culture as full blooms last only about a week

before the petals start falling off trees. And in that period and the preceding weeks, shops will pack their shelves with sakura-themed merchandise. Pink and white blossoms seem to decorate everything from beer cans to sakura-flavoured chips and flower-themed candy. The season is traditionally celebrated with hanami, or viewing parties, in cherry blossom hot spots, with picnics organised beneath the trees. The season is also considered one of change, as it marks the start of the new business year, with many university graduates starting their first full-time jobs and older colleagues shifting to new positions. Japan's Meteorological Agency stopped forecasting cherry blossoms in 2010, after more than five decades, saying other organisations were now making predictions with sufficient accuracy. The agency does, however, still declare the official start of cherry blossom season by monitoring 58 so-called barometer trees. The trees are at locations across the country and the precise locations are considered a closely-guarded secret. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Comics

BABY BLUES



GARFIELD



Free to air

CHANNEL 5

AM
6.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (HD) (PG) (V)
6.45 Just For Laughs Gags 17 (HD) (V)
7.00 First Look Asia (Simulcast From CNA) (CA)
9.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (HD) (PG) (IE)
10.00 The \$100,000 Pyramid 2 (HD) (V)
10.30 Everyday Gourmet 3 (HD) (IE)
11.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
PM
12.00 Martha Bakes 7 (HD) (IE)
12.30 Gordon Ramsay's Ultimate Cookery Course (IE)
1.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (CC) (V)
1.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (V)
2.00 Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd 4 (SC)
2.30 Arts 21 (HD) (Cul)
3.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (HD) (PG) (IE)
4.00 Make You Laugh Out Loud 3 (PG) (V)
4.30 Survivor 36 (PG) (V)
5.30 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
6.30 The \$100,000 Pyramid 2 (V)
7.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (HD) (CC) (V)
7.30 America's Got Talent: The Champions (V)
8.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 News 5 (HD)
9.30 The Wish (CC) (IE)
10.00 Becoming Singapore (CC) (IE)
11.00 Scorpion 2 (HD) (PG) (D)
AM
12.00 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)
12.30 Code Of Law 4 (PG13) (D)
1.30 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
2.20 Hawaii Five-O 7 (PG13) (D)
3.10 Lethal Weapon (PG) (D)
4.10 Martha Bakes 7 (IE)
4.40 Gordon Ramsay's Ultimate Cookery Course (IE)
5.10 The Dr Oz Show 10 (PG) (IE)

CHANNEL 8

AM
6.00 Ah Ma Can Cook (V)
7.00 The Best Of Food Source 3 (V)
7.30 Hello Singapore Highlights (HD) (News)
8.00 Walk With Me (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 Morning Express (HD) (News)

9.30 Jalan Jalan (PG) (CC) (D)
10.00 Stay Healthy Stay Happy 2017 (IE)
10.30 Night Market Life Aka Life (PG) (D)
PM
12.30 Street Smart 2 (V)
1.00 News 8 At One (HD)
1.30 118 (PG) (CC) (D)
2.00 New Doraemon (S)
2.30 The Precedents (PG) (D)
3.30 The Golden Path (CC) (D)
4.30 Taste Of Life (PG) (D)
5.30 When Duty Calls (PG) (CC) (D)
6.30 Hello Singapore (HD) (News)
7.30 Jalan Jalan (PG) (CC) (D)
8.00 A Sweet Taste Of Art (CC) (IE)
9.00 Walk With Me (PG) (CC) (D)
10.00 News Tonight (HD)
10.30 Fruit, Veggies & Me 2 (HD) (CC) (IE)
11.00 Princess Agents (PG) (D)
AM
12.00 The Princess Weiyung (PG) (D)
1.00 Celebrity Chef 2 (HD) (V)
2.00 Fiery Passion (D)
4.00 A Place Called Home (PG) (D)

CHANNEL U

PM
3.00 Scrum! (PG) (CC) (D)
4.00 Guess Who 5 (IE)
5.00 Cheongdamdong Scandal (PG) (CC) (D)
6.00 The Girl Who Sees Smells (PG) (CC) (D)
7.00 My Father Is Strange (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 Schools Unlimited (CC) (IE)
10.00 Brother's Keeper 2 (PG13) (CC) (D)
11.00 News Tonight
11.30 Schools Unlimited (CC) (Info-Ed)
AM
12.30 My Father Is Strange (PG) (CC) (D)
2.30 Close

CNA

AM
6.00 Singapore Tonight
7.00 First Look Asia
9.00 Asia Business First
10.02 Undercover Asia 6
11.00 News Now
PM
1.02 When We Play
2.00 News Now
4.02 Undercover Asia 6
5.00 News Now

7.02 Bridging The Skills Gap: Beyond Classrooms (CC)
8.00 Primetime Asia
9.02 Champions For Change (CC)
10.00 Singapore Tonight
11.02 When We Play
AM
12.00 News Now
12.30 Indonesia's Game Changers
1.02 Champions For Change
2.00 News Now
2.30 Asia Exposed
3.02 Undercover Asia 6
4.00 News Now
4.30 Indonesia's Game Changers
5.02 Champions For Change
Programmes may be pre-empted by breaking news

VASANTHAM

PM
3.00 Super Samayal 4 (IE)
3.30 Anjaraipetti 5 (IE)
4.00 Priyasakhi (D)
4.30 Thedal - Star Search 2016 (V)
5.30 Mighty Raju Animation Series (S)
6.00 Ishq Ka Rang Safed (Hindi) (PG) (D)
7.00 Konjam Soru Konjam Varalaru (PG) (Cul)
7.30 Mella Thiranthathu Kathavu 3 (PG) (CC) (D)
8.00 Uyire (PG) (CC) (D)
8.30 Tamil Seithi (News)
9.00 Ethiroli 15 (HD) (CC) (CA)
9.30 Theerpugal 4 (CC) (IE)
10.00 Rowthiram (PG13) (D)
10.30 Nijangal (PG) (CC) (D)
11.00 Maalai Maalai Vasantham (V)
11.30 Tamil Seithi (Encore) (News)
AM
12.00 Close

OKTO

AM
9.00 Tip The Mouse (P)
9.30 Teddies (P)
10.00 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)
10.30 Sesame Street (HD) (P)
11.00 Mouk (P)
11.30 Ready Jet Go! (P)
PM
12.00 Hiccup & Sneeze (P)
12.30 Teddies (P)

1.00 Coconut The Little Dragon (P)
1.30 Tip The Mouse (P)
2.00 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)
2.30 Sesame Street (HD) (P)
3.00 Mouk (P)
3.30 Ready Jet Go! (P)
4.00 Odd Squad (S)
4.30 Captain Flinn And The Pirate Dinosaurs (S)
5.00 Littlest Pet Shop (S)
5.30 Marcus Level (S)
6.00 The New Powerpuff Girls (S)
6.30 Totally Totto (HD) (S)
7.00 My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic (CC) (S)
7.30 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (HD) (CC) (S)
8.00 Turning Mecard (S)
8.30 Inazuma Eleven (HD) (CC) (S)
9.00 ATP 250: Montpellier 2019 (Sports)
11.00 American Ninja Warrior 6 (HD) (PG) (Sports)
AM
12.00 Close

SURIA

PM
3.00 Juxbox Ekspres
4.00 Bibik-Bibikku (PG) (D)
5.00 Rapuh (PG) (CC) (D)
6.00 Ejen Ali (HD) (S)
6.30 Top 5 Makan (CC) (IE)
7.00 Makmum Yang Paling Aku Cinta (PG) (CC) (D)
8.00 Berita (HD) (News)
8.30 Detik (PG) (CA)
9.00 Alah Abang, Amboi Kakak (PG) (CC) (IE) (Debut)
9.30 Hilang Kasih Di Sarajevo (CC) (D)
10.30 Bingit (PG) (D)
11.30 Berita (HD) (News) (R)
AM
12.00 Close

C: Children; CA: Current Affairs; CC: Closed Captions; Cul: Culture; D: Drama; IE: Info-Ed; M: Movies; P: Preschool; PG: Parental Guidance; R: Repeat; S: Schoolkids; SC: Sitcom; V: Variety

Programme schedules correct at time of printing. Telecast details from Mediacorp, StarHub and Singtel TV. For pay TV updates, go to www.starhub.com/tv or www.singtelv.com.sg

StarHub TV

HISTORY (CHANNEL 401)

AM
8.00 Storage Wars 10
8.30 Swamp People 8
9.30 Mountain Men 7
10.25 Forged In Fire 4
11.20 Storage Wars 11
11.45 Storage Wars: Texas 5
PM
12.15 The Curse Of Oak Island 4
1.10 Swamp People 8/2.05 Pawn Stars 18
2.35 Storage Wars: Texas 6
3.00 Storage Wars 10/3.30 Storage Wars 11
3.55 Storage Wars: Texas 5
4.25 Forged In Fire 4
5.20 Mountain Men 7
6.15 Swamp People 8/7.10 Pawn Stars 18
8.05 History Drama: Project Blue Book
9.00 Ancient Aliens 10
9.55 History Drama: Project Blue Book
10.50 Hunting Hitler 2
11.45 The Curse Of Oak Island 4

LIFETIME (CHANNEL 514)

AM
8.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
9.00 Gok's Fill Your House For Free
10.00 Glam Masters
11.00 Atlanta Plastic 2
PM
12.00 Dance Moms 7
1.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
2.00 Sea Change/3.35 Love At First Flight
4.30 Who Runs The World With Mongchin
5.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
6.00 Man Vs Child: Chef Showdown 2
7.00 Little Women LA: Terra's Little Family
7.30 Married At First Sight Australia 4
9.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
10.00 The Lover In The Attic: A True Story
11.35 Man Vs Child: Chef Showdown 2

HBO (CHANNEL 601)

AM
7.50 Paterno (NC16)
9.35 The 15:17 To Paris (NC16)
11.05 Starsky & Hutch (NC16)
PM
12.45 Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen
3.10 Down With Love
4.50 Pride & Prejudice
6.55 Star Trek (2009)
9.00 Action Point (NC16)
10.25 True Detective 3 (NC16)
11.25 Street Kings (NC16)
AM
1.10 You, Me And Dupree (NC16)
2.55 My Favorite Wedding

CINEMAX (CHANNEL 611)

AM
7.40 Big Momma's House 2 (NC16)
9.20 MacArthur
11.30 Vixen The Movie (2017)
PM
12.45 Dragonheart: Battle For The Heartfire/2.25 48 Hrs
4.00 Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back/6.05 The Perfect Storm
8.15 Looking Glass (NC16)

10.00 From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter (M18)
11.30 Pulp Fiction (M18)
AM
2.00 The Godfather (NC16)

HUB E CITY (CHANNEL 825)

AM
8.15 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)
9.15 Dowry (HD)
10.15 Viva La Romance (HD)
PM
12.15 Still Loving You (HD)/1.30 Signal (HD)
2.45 The King Vs The King 2 (HD)
4.15 Go As Far As You Can (HD)
4.45 Still Loving You (HD)
6.00 Dowry (HD)
7.00 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)
8.00 Chinese Restaurant 2 (HD)
10.00 Noble Aspirations (HD)
11.00 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)

HUB SPORTS 1 (CHANNEL 201)

AM
7.00 ISU Four Continents Figure Skating Championships 2019: Pairs Short Programme/9.30 ISU Four Continents Figure Skating Championships 2019: Ice Dance Short Dance
PM
12.00 Multi Sport: Fise World Series Highlights 2018: Montpellier
1.00 Multi Sport: Action Sports World 2018
2.00 Tennis: Fed Cup By BNP Paribas 2019 First Round Czech Republic Vs Romania: Day 2 Rubber 3/5.00 Tennis: Deuce 2019
5.30 Tennis: ATP World Tour Uncovered 2019/6.00 ATP 500 ABN Amro World Tennis Tournament: Day 3 Session 1
AM
12.00 Mountain Bike: Crankworx World Tour 2018: Rotorua Highlights:
1.00 FEI Equestrian World 2019
1.30 Tennis: Deuce 2019

HUB SPORTS 2 (CHANNEL 202)

AM
7.00 Football: EFL Championship 2018 Matchday 31 Stoke City Vs West Bromwich Albion/9.00 Wrestling: WWE Smackdown (PG) (Live)
11.00 Rugby: HSBC Sevens Series 2018/19 Round 3 Hamilton Highlights
11.30 Football: The EFL Highlights 2018/19
PM
12.00 Magazine: Omnisport.TV
12.30 Basketball: Asean Basketball League 2018/19 Mono Vampire Vs CLS Knights Indonesia
2.30 Football: EFL Championship 2018 Matchday 31 Aston Villa Vs Sheffield United
4.30 Wrestling: WWE This Week (PG)
5.00 Football: The Football Review
5.30 Basketball: National Basketball League Round 17 Sydney Kings Vs Melbourne United
7.30 Magazine: Omnisport.TV
8.00 Basketball: Asean Basketball League 2018/19 Hong Kong Eastern Vs San Miguel Alab Pilipinas (Live)
10.00 Wrestling: WWE Raw (PG13)
AM
12.30 Wrestling: WWE This Week (PG)

Singtel TV

CARTOON NETWORK (CHANNEL 226)

AM
6.00 Oggy & The Cockroaches
7.00 The Tom And Jerry Show
8.00 Teen Titans Go!
9.00 Grizzly And The Lemmings
9.30 The Tom And Jerry Show
10.00 We Bare Bears
10.30 Supernooobs
11.00 The Powerpuff Girls
PM
12.00 Teen Titans Go!
1.00 We Bare Bears
2.00 Ninjago: Masters Of Spinjitzu
2.30 Craig Of The Creek
3.00 Rat-A-Tat
3.30 The Amazing World Of Gumball
4.00 We Bare Bears
4.30 The Powerpuff Girls
5.00 Teen Titans Go!
5.30 Craig Of The Creek
6.00 Ben 10 Challenge
6.30 Oggy & The Cockroaches
7.00 The Tom And Jerry Show
7.30 Grizzly And The Lemmings
8.00 We Bare Bears
9.00 The Powerpuff Girls
10.00 Regular Show
10.30 Steven Universe
11.00 Clarence
11.30 Adventure Time

AXN (HD) (CHANNEL 304)

AM
6.00 MacGyver 2
6.50 Seal Team
7.40 Team Ninja Warrior
8.30 American Ninja Warrior 7
9.25 MacGyver 2
10.20 Seal Team
11.10 The Amazing Race Asia 5
PM
1.00 Quantico 3
1.55 American Ninja Warrior 7
2.50 MacGyver 2
3.45 Seal Team
4.35 The Amazing Race Asia 5
6.25 The Blacklist 6
7.15 Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders
8.10 NCIS: Los Angeles 8
10.00 Seal Team 2
10.55 Supernatural 14
11.50 NCIS: Los Angeles 8

WARNER TV (HD) (CHANNEL 306)

AM
6.00 The Carbonaro Effect 2
6.50 Major Crimes 5
7.40 DC's Legends Of Tomorrow
8.30 Person Of Interest 4
9.20 The Flash 4
10.05 The Carbonaro Effect 2
10.55 Almost Genius
11.45 The Lego Movie
PM
1.35 The Big Bang Theory 9
1.55 Friends 9
2.20 The Carbonaro Effect 2

3.10 Almost Genius
4.00 The Flash 4
4.50 Person Of Interest 4
5.40 Major Crimes 5
6.30 The Flash 4
7.20 The Big Bang Theory 9
7.45 Friends 9
8.10 Almost Genius
9.00 Lethal Weapon 3
9.50 Race To The Scene
10.40 The Big Bang Theory 9
11.05 Friends 9
11.30 Lethal Weapon 3

COMEDY CENTRAL ASIA (HD) (CHANNEL 324)

AM
6.00 At Midnight With Chris Hardwick 2
6.20 The Daily Show 24
6.45 Just For Laughs Gags 14
7.10 Mr Bean
7.40 Most Ridiculous
8.10 Amazingness
8.35 Mr Bean
9.05 Caraoke Showdown
9.30 Just For Laughs Gags 14
9.55 Hot In Cleveland 2
10.45 Mr Bean
11.15 Saturday Night Live 43
PM
12.05 The Daily Show 24
12.30 Eddie Izzard: The United Nations Of Comedy
1.15 The Comedy Jam
2.10 Saturday Night Live 43
3.00 The Burn With Jeff Ross 2
3.25 Jeff Ross Presents Roast Battle II: War Of The Words
4.15 Lip Sync Battle 4
5.10 Mr Bean
5.40 Inside Comedy 2
6.10 The Daily Show 24
6.35 Your Face Or Mine 4
7.00 Amazingness
7.25 Billy On The Street 3
7.50 Most Ridiculous 2
8.40 The Goldbergs 5
9.30 Hot In Cleveland 6
10.20 Inglorious Pranksters
10.35 Inside Amy Schumer
10.55 Above Average Presents
11.00 The Jim Jefferies Show
11.25 Above Average Presents
11.30 The Daily Show 24

JIA LE (HD) (CHANNEL 502)

AM
6.00 Taste Of Love
7.00 First Love
8.00 Entrepreneurial Age
9.00 Eagle And Youngster
10.00 100% Wife
PM
12.10 First Love
1.00 In The Name Of Love
2.00 100% Wife
4.10 Entrepreneurial Age
5.00 First Love
6.00 In The Name Of Love
7.00 100% Wife
9.10 First Love
10.00 Entrepreneurial Age
11.00 Eagle And Youngster

TheStarsSay

Aries (March 21 - April 19)
E-communication is your forte. Watch your mobile device. You have no excuse to be out of the loop.

Taurus (April 20 - May 20)
Your wheels are spinning, but try not to be frustrated. Refrain from investing energy on hopeless causes.

Gemini (May 21 - June 20)
You need conversation to solve problems. To dream up new ways to succeed, look forward.

Cancer (June 21 - July 22)
You know the stress is going to your heart. You can start to recharge once you admit it is all too much.

Leo (July 23 - Aug 22)
You need a party - throw one yourself. You need others to help you reach the next level of growth.

Virgo (Aug 23 - Sept 22)
Take greater care with your words as someone needs special attention. Relax, it will not take long.

Libra (Sept 23 - Oct 22)
You are busier than usual, but have the energy to cope. Things are getting better. You should build on it.

Scorpio (Oct 23 - Nov 21)
You are tempted to blow off someone, but you may get burnt. Stick with your responsibilities.

Sagittarius (Nov 22 - Dec 21)
You are feeling excited about today's big business. Things will speed up by the end of the day.

Capricorn (Dec 22 - Jan 19)
Your desire for clear communication is foiled by folks who cannot focus. Make sure they stay on task.

Aquarius (Jan 20 - Feb 18)
Your romantic life is heating up in a big way. You should find the spark rekindling some time tonight.

Pisces (Feb 19 - March 20)
It is a good time to indulge your poetic side. Do not be too specific, just get the gist across.

- Provided by Astrology.com (www.astrology.com)

Radio

KISS92

AM
6.00 Maddy, Jason & Arnold In The Morning
10.00 Carol Smith
PM
1.00 Charmaine Yee
4.00 Shan Wee
8.00 Josh's Goodnight Kiss

ONE FM 91.3

AM
6.00 ONE FM's #1 Breakfast Show With Glenn And The Flying Dutchman
10.00 Cheryl Miles
PM
4.00 Weekdays With ONE FM

MONEY FM 89.3

AM
6.00 The Breakfast Huddle With Elliott Danker, Yasmin Jonkers & Ryan Huang
10.00 Midday With Howie Lim
PM
2.00 Prime Time With Claressa Monteiro
4.00 The Curve With Michelle Martin & Bernard Lim

UFM100.3

AM
6.00 UFM100.3 Mornings With Wenhong, Limei & Xiaozhu
10.00 Lively Life With Kemlin
PM
1.00 Tea With Yuling
4.00 Sing-a-long With Xinying & Weilong
8.00 Feel The Night With Chengyao

96.3 HAO FM

AM
6.00 Morning Drive Time With Jing Yun, De Ming And Jie Qi
10.00 Lunch Break With Anna
PM
1.00 Automation
4.00 Evening Drive Time With Li Yi And Guo Xian
8.00 Night Time With Wei Wen

Tides

SUN RISE/SET TIME: 7.17am/7.21pm
MOON RISE/SET TIME: 1.18pm/12.55am

TIDES TODAY: Singapore: 4.01am (2.7m), 10.31am (1.1m), 4.43pm (2.3m), 10.15pm (1.4m). Desaru: 3.24am (2.5m), 9.56am (1.3m), 4.31pm (2.3m), 10.05pm (1.7m). Port Dickson: 6.01am (0.9m), 11.31am (1.8m), 5.42pm (0.6m). Mersing: 2.49am (2.6m), 9.25am (1.3m), 4.16pm (2.5m), 9.59pm (2m).

TIDES TOMORROW: Singapore: 4.54am (2.6m), 11.52am (1.1m), 6.28pm (2.1m), 11.35pm (1.6m). Desaru: 3.58am (2.4m), 11.01am (1.2m), 6.05pm (2.3m), 11.33pm (1.9m). Port Dickson: 12.39am (2m), 7.17am (1m), 12.39pm (1.7m), 7.03pm (0.7m). Mersing: 3.19am (2.4m), 10.16am (1.2m), 5.49pm (2.6m), 11.40pm (2.1m).

For updates and more details, call Meteorological Service Singapore, NEA, on 6542-7788 or go to www.nea.gov.sg

Zhang Yimou film yanked from Berlinale

BERLIN • The official reason given is “technical difficulties encountered during post-production”, but some cinema pundits wonder if Beijing pulled the plug.
The speculation arose on Monday after the Berlin film festival said a new movie by acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou had been yanked from the competition – a highly unusual move – days before

its world premiere on Friday.
Yi Miao Zhong (One Second) is billed as an intimate portrait of a prisoner who escaped from a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution and is on a trek to see a key newsreel in a rural village cinema, reported Reuters.
The film’s press material noted that Zhang, 68, “was sent to the country as a young man during the

Cultural Revolution, an experience he has explored in many of his films”.
Though he had positioned his movie as a personal tribute to cinema, talk immediately surfaced that it could have unnerved some politicians back home.
The 1966 to 1976 Cultural Revolution remains a sensitive topic in China, said trade publication Variety.

The Berlinale festival, one of Europe’s top cinema showcases, said it would show an earlier Zhang work instead – rumoured to be 2002’s Hero – and that the competition for the Golden Bear top prize would now feature only 16 titles.
A jury led by French Oscar winner Juliette Binoche is to pick the winner on Saturday.
The cancellation follows that of

another Chinese film, Better Days, which was also withdrawn last week for “technical reasons”.
It was described as a story about disaffected youth and was to premiere in the Generation section.
Insiders in the Chinese film and television industry have recently noted sharper government scrutiny.
The entertainment sector had

blossomed in recent years, with official encouragement by a government keen to replace foreign content with home-grown fare and develop the industry as a global “soft power” asset.
But a nationwide push for more material approved by the Communist Party across media, music and entertainment has had a chilling effect on some artists.

Richard Gere new dad at 69

NEW YORK • Actor Richard Gere is a father again, at age 69.
His wife Alejandra Silva, 35, gave birth to a boy a few days ago in New York City, according to E! News.
The baby is their first child, though Gere also has a 19-year-old son from a previous marriage to actress Carey Lowell.
Ms Silva, a publicist, also has a son from a former marriage.
Gere got married last year after a relationship with Ms Silva that started from 2015, shortly after she wrapped up her divorce.
Her father is Mr Ignacio Silva, a former vice-president of the Real Madrid football club in Spain.
In September, she posted a photograph of herself and Gere visiting

the Dalai Lama in Rotterdam in the Netherlands.
The Dalai Lama put his hand on her bump to bless the unborn child.
“Just a few moments ago... Getting blessings for our precious to come,” she wrote on Instagram about the meeting. “We couldn’t announce it (the pregnancy) before telling HH Dalai Lama.”
Gere, a Buddhist, is a long-time friend of Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader.
The actor, who was also married to supermodel Cindy Crawford from 1991 to 1995, will return to the small screen for the first time in nearly three decades, playing a media mogul in upcoming BBC drama series MotherFatherSon.



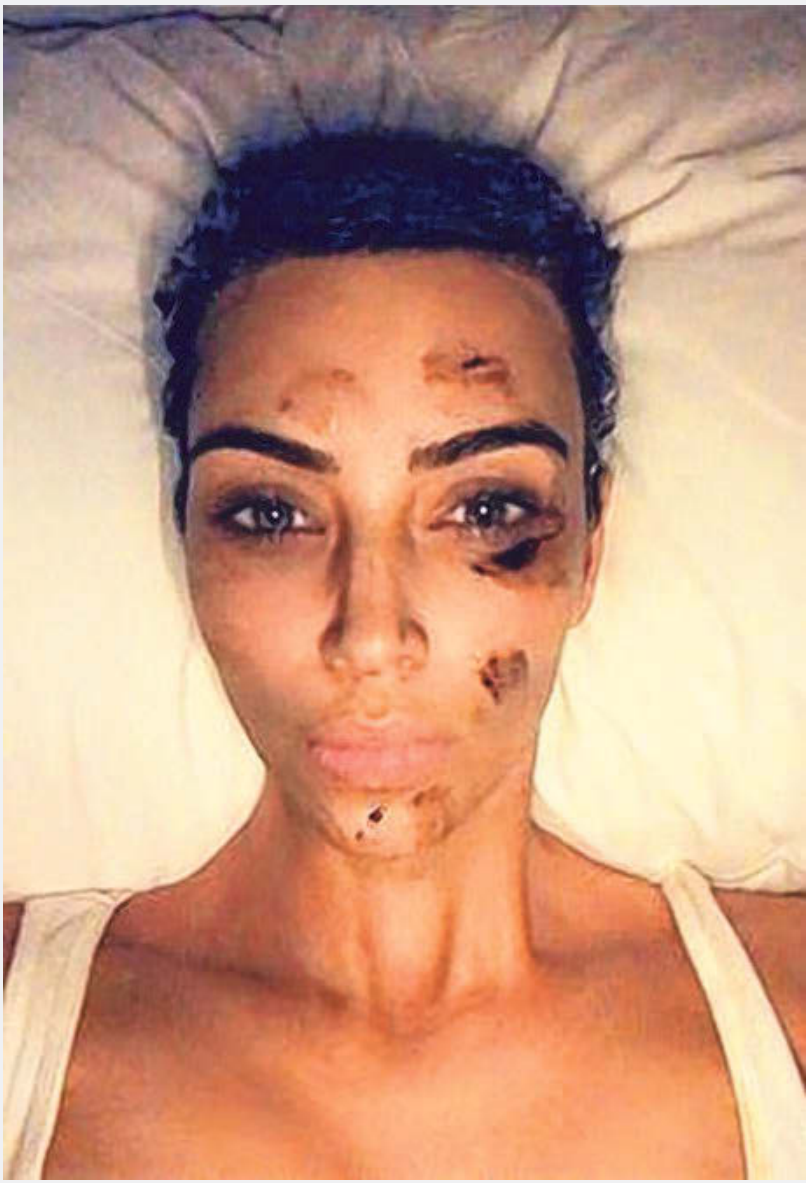
Actor Richard Gere and his wife Alejandra Silva welcomed a boy a few days ago. PHOTO: ALEJANDRA GERE/INSTAGRAM

Chyi Yu, Michelle Pan to perform in Singapore

Jan Lee
Taiwanese veteran singers Chyi Yu and Michelle Pan will hold a concert in Singapore to celebrate the life of late Taiwanese author Echo Chen, better known as San Mao.
Chyi and Pan, both 61, are slated to perform at The Star Theatre on April 27. Tickets – ranging from \$88 to \$178 – will go on sale on Feb 20.
The concert, Echo, is named after the 1985 album that featured songs with lyrics penned by Chen and performed by both Chyi and Pan. Several of the songs featured narration by Chen.
The well-known writer and avid traveller wrote the autobiographi-

cal The Stories Of The Sahara as well as the script to the film Red Dust (1990). She died at the age of 47 in 1991.
Chyi, known for hits such as 1979’s Olive Tree (with lyrics written by Chen), and Pan, known for songs such as Springtime For The Wild Lily (1983), are both fans of the author.
The concert will shine a spotlight on the life of Chen, with Chyi and Pan performing songs from Echo as well as their own hits at the concert.
Tickets will be available for purchase from Apactix (go to www.apactix.com or call 3158-8588). For more information, go to www.facebook.com/RockRecordsSingapore

On social media



FACE TIME WITH KARDASHIAN: Kim Kardashian is not afraid to face up to her skin problems publicly.
On Monday, she posted a photo of herself in an unglamorous state – lying down with dark splotches of ointment on her face, forehead and chin.
“Psoriasis is the sh”s!” the 38-year-old reality star wrote. She later posted that she was using a “herbal ointment” before she released another photo that seemed to show a light therapy device – a recommended treatment method – and whose caption read: “My new best friend.”
She also put up a photo of her legs covered with red spots, accompanied by a defiant “Sexy” caption.
Psoriasis, which she has suffered from for years, is a skin condition that causes a thick, patchy, red rash with silvery, white scales.
Despite her skin woes, the wife of rapper Kanye West has not resorted to hiding at home, reported the Entertainment Tonight portal.
Last Saturday, she turned up at her make-up artist Mario Dedivanovic’s master class, where he showcased to participants some of the techniques that he uses on her. PHOTO: KIM KARDASHIAN/INSTAGRAM

Genie ‘the stuff of nightmares’



Will Smith was revealed in CGI form as a blue Genie in a trailer for the upcoming Aladdin film. PHOTO: ALADDIN/INSTAGRAM

LOS ANGELES • Many fans of Aladdin are feeling blue after Disney gave a preview of the upcoming live-action movie adaptation during the Grammy Awards on Sunday.
Netizens quickly vented their unhappiness over the trailer that had Aladdin approaching the Cave of Wonders in search of the magic lamp and revealing Will Smith in CGI form as a blue Genie.
“It turns out that Will Smith’s Aladdin Genie will haunt my nightmares,” tweeted one user.
Another added: “I’ll never sleep again and it’s all Will Smith’s fault.”
One netizen wrote: “Aladdin: I have a request. Genie: Name it.

Aladdin: Delete this movie already.”
Smith might have anticipated such a terse reaction when he said recently that it was “always terrifying” whenever “you’re doing things that are iconic”, reported BBC.
Aladdin is a reboot of Disney’s 1992 animated film based on an Arabic folk tale.
While there were also comments that were less critical, Disney must now be wishing that the movie will not lose its magic at the box office when it opens in May.
Directed by Guy Ritchie, it also stars Mena Massoud as Aladdin and Naomi Scott as Jasmine.

Nichkhun to release EP

SEOUL • 2PM singer Nichkhun is set to further his solo career.
On Monday at 6pm, he is releasing an EP, called Me, in South Korea.
It will be his first record as a solo artist since he joined the South Korean boyband in 2008.
Nichkhun’s move to ramp up his industry presence comes after he rolled out his first solo record of the same name in Japan in December.
He also stretched his wings as an independent artist with a first solo tour last November and December that saw him performing in Osaka and Tokyo.
Last year, his fan meetings in Japan, Thailand and China were sell-outs.
Dubbed the “Thai prince” by fans, the United States-born Thai singer is one of the most popular foreign-born celebrities in South Korea, having appeared in a number of variety shows and dramas on television, reported The Korea Herald.
A Thai film starring Nichkhun, titled Brother Of The Year, is slated to open in South Korea next month.



Nichkhun of South Korean boyband 2PM is launching his EP, Me, in South Korea on Monday. PHOTO: NICHKHUN HORVEJKUL/INSTAGRAM

In Short

Grammy viewership holds steady
Viewership for the Grammy Awards held steady on Sunday night, drawing an American audience of 19.9 million people, according to Nielsen.
That was slightly better than the 19.8 million viewers who tuned in last year.

Cardi B thanks dead rocker by mistake
Maybe Cardi B’s mind was a bit fuzzy after one drink too many as she celebrated her Best Rap Album Grammy win on Sunday.
Among the people the rapper thanked for congratulating her was Tom Petty, but the rocker died in 2017.